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CANTONESE AMAHS' 'PUBLIC HOUSE' :

A MODEL OF CHINESE WOMEN IMMIGRANTS'

VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION.

BY

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The picture given in this study may not be representative of the whole in general. Statistical accuracy cannot be claimed in regard to the figures that have been given nor can the complete exactness of all information be guaranteed. This is regrettable but inevitable, since the people themselves seemed not to have a full knowledge of their own customs and there are certain customs which they are / were practising just because others have been practising them. However this study is an attempt to present the facts in an objective and descriptive manner.

SYNOPSIS

Cantonese unattached female workers who emigrated to Malaya from China between 1933 - 1938 were of two kinds. Firstly, there were widows and wives forced into separation from their husbands because of economic or social circumstances and had to make their own decisions about their future. Secondly there were spinsters who had taken vows not to marry when still in China and wives who were ritually married but where marriage was not consummated. Such women were associated in their homeland with a female anti-marriage movement originating sometime in the late 19th century in the Kwangtung district of Shun-te. With them they brought some cultural institutions and practices which were popular as anti-marriage societies in Kwangtung. These institutions and practices which served their many social needs was successfully practised in a foreign country owing to its adaptability to new environment. Among these, is a unique form of voluntary association called the 'public houses' i.e. the 'kung sz uk' and 'tsz mooi uk'.

The picture given in this study may not be representative of the amahs in general. Statistical accuracy cannot be claimed in regard to the figures that have been given nor can the complete exactitude of all information be guaranteed. This is regrettable but inevitable, since the amahs themselves seemed not to have a full knowledge of their own customs and there are certain customs which they are / were practising just because others have been practising them. However this study is an attempt to present the facts in an objective and descriptive manner.

SIPNOSIS

Pekerja wanita Cantonese yang tidak berkahwin yang telah berhijrah ke Malaya dari negeri China di antara tahun 1933 - 1938 terdiri daripada dua golongan. Golongan pertama adalah janda-janda dan isteri-isteri yang terpaksa berpisah dengan suami-suami mereka kerana keadaan ekonomi ataupun sosial. Oleh itu, mereka terpaksa memutuskan masa depan mereka. Golongan kedua adalah anak dara - anak dara yang telah bersumpah tidak akan berkahwin semasa berada di negeri China lagi, dan isteri-isteri yang telah berkahwin mengikut adat-istiadat tetapi di mana kehidupan sebagai suami-isteri tidak di jalankan. Wanita-wanita ini berkait dengan penggerakan anti-perkahwinan anjuran kaum wanita di negeri China yang tercetus dalam lewat abad kesembilan-belas di daerah Shun-te dalam wilayah Kwangtung. Bersama-sama mereka di bawa beberapa institusi budaya dan amalan yang populer kepada penggerakan anti-perkahwinan di Kwangtung ke dalam Malaya. Institusi-institusi dan amalan-amalan ini yang dapat memenuhi kebanyakan keperluan sosial mereka di amalkan dengan berjayanya dalam sebuah negara asing kerana sifat penyesuaiannya kepada keadaan alam sekeliling baru. Di antara ini, adalah satu bentuk kesatuan sukarela yang unik yang di gelar 'public houses' iaitu 'kung sz uk' dan 'tsz moo uk'.

Gambaran yang di beri dalam kajian ini mungkin tidak dapat mewakili 'amahs' pada amnya. Ketepatan statistik bersabit dengan angka-angka yang di beri dan ketepatan semua matlumat yang di beri tidak dapat di akui ataupun di jamin. Perkara-perkara ini di sesali tetapi adalah tidak dapat di elakkan kerana 'amahs' sendiri nampaknya tidak mempunyai pengetahuan yang lengkap mengenai adat-adat mereka. Terdapat beberapa adat yang mereka telah amalkan /

yang masih lagi di amalkan kerana sejak dulunya ianya di amalkan. Walau bagaimanapun kajian ini merupakan satu percubaan untuk menghuraikan fakta-fakta secara objektif dan dalam bentuk diskriptif.

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(iii) the main purpose for the establishment of these voluntary associations.

(iv) their members' economic position, size and their provision for old age,

1. INTRODUCTION

Much has been researched, written and published about the Chinese in general, but as far as the writer knows, little has been done on the Chinese female immigrants especially the Cantonese domestic amahs in Malaysia.

1.1 Objectives

This study is an attempt to examine a traditional Chinese institution referred to in Chinese as 'public houses' (wiz. 'kung sz uk' - shared house and 'tsz mooi uk' - sisters' house). These are houses for Cantonese female immigrant workers who came to Malaya in large numbers during the 1930s. These are units of accommodation occupied permanently or occasionally by groups of women in the same occupation and often from the same locality in Kwangtung. The majority however, are used by Cantonese domestic servants known as 'amahs'.

The focus of attention will be :

- (i) the various types of informal and voluntary Cantonese domestic amahs' associations there were during the years when Malaysia, then Malaya, was under the British Colonial Office and the present times.
- (ii) the role of this voluntary associations in helping the Cantonese women immigrants adjust to life on foreign soil, away from family and relatives.
- (iii) the main purpose for the establishment of these voluntary associations.
- (iv) their members' economic position, ties and their provision for old age.

- (v) their members' outlook on marriage, religion and superstition.
- (vi) to compare the present roles of these associations and those of the past.
- (vii) the future of these associations.

1.2 Scope

Area of this study is confined to Penang and the amahs falling within the scope of study are those :-

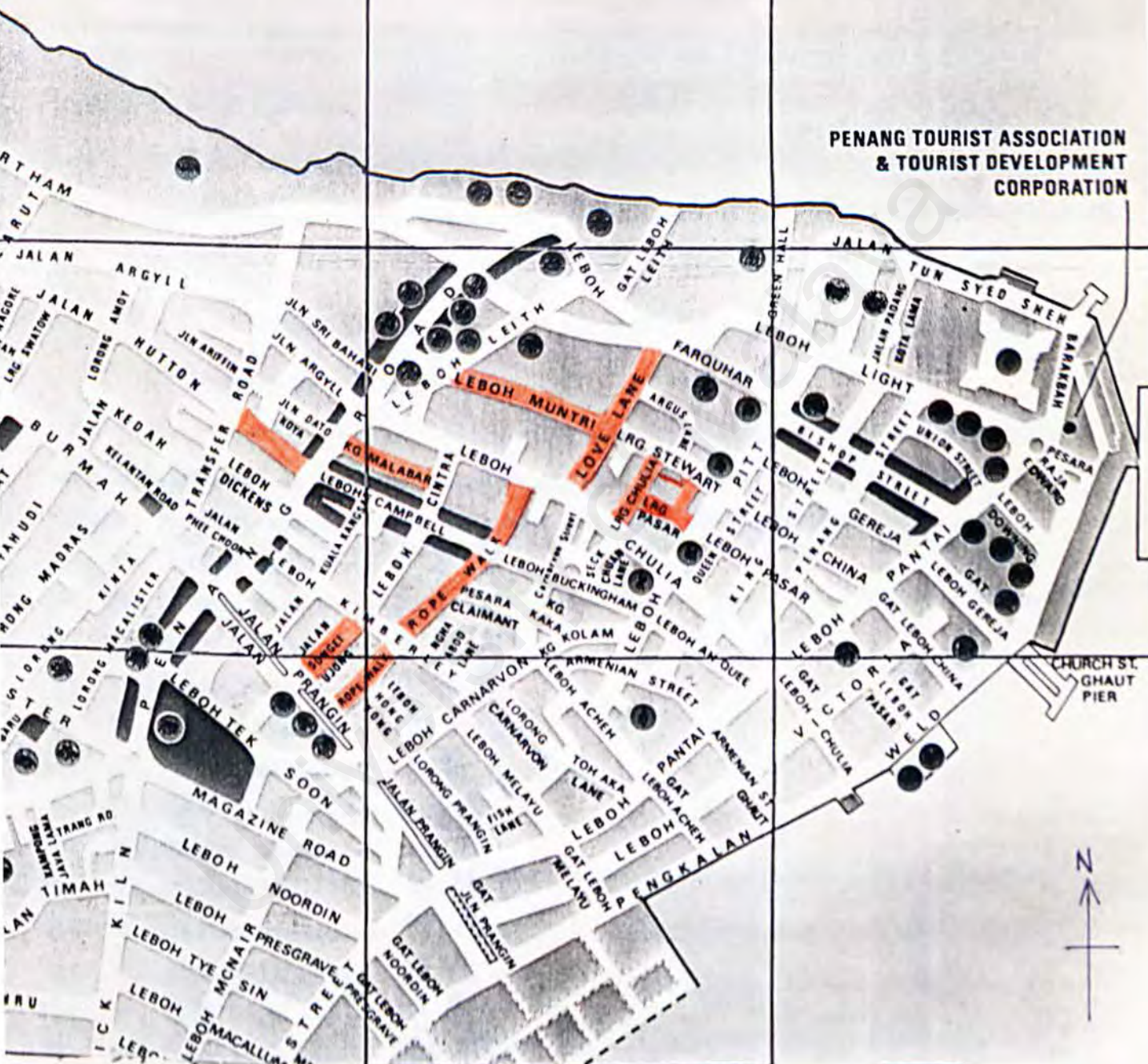
- (i) who speak the Cantonese dialect.
- (ii) who were born in China.
- (iii) who belong to the 'public house'.
- (iv) who are or were domestic servants (amahs)
- (v) persons who in the course of their social life have come to be acquainted to these Cantonese domestic amahs.

A total of 53 respondents were interviewed : 20 amahs from the 'public houses', 26 people who were domestic servants and are now living in the Old Folks Home and 7 Outsiders (not amahs) who are acquainted to these Cantonese domestic amahs.

In Penang today, the number of 'public houses' have dwindled. Presently, the writer believes, there are only 20 of these 'public houses' that are still in existence. Out of this total, 16 'public houses' were visited by the writer, but unfortunately, the writer was not able to interview the residents from all the 'public houses', the respondents are taken only from 13 'public houses'. As for respondents from the Old Folks Home, only 3 Homes were

Plate 1 : Map of Georgetown City : Location of fieldwork.

Scale - 5" : 1 mile (approx)



14. 39, Kampung Malabar — 群居
 *15. 11, Hutton Lane — 義和祥
 16. 10, Jln. Sungai Ujong — 義和祥

visited i.e. Little Sisters of the Poor, Silver Jubilee Home for the Aged and Penang Home Association for the Infirm.

Penang was chosen as the area for this study is purely for reasons of convenience because :

- (i) The writer has some acquaintances (not amahs) who know some of the amahs personally and were willing to help by introducing some of these amahs as respondents. They also volunteered to supply and explain whatever that may be doubtful to the writer in the course of this study.
- (ii) These 'public houses' are easily accessible as they are located not very far from the writer's house.
- (iii) Presently, a significant number of amahs are found in Penang, while their number in Melaka and Singapore, the previous Straits Settlements has decreased considerably. Thus making the 'findings' much more representative.

1.3 Theory

Louis Wirth classic essay "Urbanism as A Way of Life" (1938) stated that a city may be defined as a relatively large and permanent settlement of socially heterogenous individuals. Due to a large number of persons in the state of interaction with one another, the level of communication between two individuals is low but there is a great tendency for their communication to proceed on an elementary level, i.e., on the basis of those things which are assumed to be common or to be of interest to all. This is essentially what is meant by saying that the city is characterised

by secondary rather than primary contacts. Hence, contacts of the city are impersonal, superficial, transitory and segmental. These constitute essentially the state of anomie or the social void. Under these circumstances, it is necessary for individuals to communicate through indirect mediums and to articulate interests by a process of delegation, resulting in the enormous multiplication of voluntary associations, directed towards as great a variety of objectives as there are human needs and interests.

Kenneth Little (1957 : pp 581) in his study of voluntary associations in Africa, agreed with Wirth on the presence of these associations in the cities but disagreed on the reasons for their establishment. Little stated that one of the most striking characteristic of these modern towns is the very large number and variety of voluntary associations. According to Little, these voluntary associations had been formed to meet certain needs arising specifically out of the urban environment of its members. As an example, the Ibo State Unions. These tribal unions were formed to protect the Ibo and other migrants from Eastern Nigeria from the hostile ways in which they were received when they seek employment in towns of the West and North of Nigeria. Their aim is to provide members with mutual aids, including support, while out of work; sympathy and financial assistance in the case of illness; and the responsibility for the funeral and the repatriation of the deceased in the case of death. (Offodile : 1947 : pp 937, 939, 941 and Lombard : 1954). To Little, in relation to the urban immigrant, the significance of voluntary associations as an adaptive mechanism is most apparent, as the newly arrived immigrant from rural areas has been used to living and working as member of a compact group of kinsmen and neighbours

on a highly personal basis of relationship and mutuality. He knows of no other way of community living than this, and his natural reaction is to make similar adjustment to urban conditions. The association facilitates this adjustment to the more cosmopolitan ethos of the city by substituting for the extended group of kinsmen a grouping based upon common interests which are capable of serving many of the same needs as the traditional family or lineage.

Wirth (1938 : pp 20) and many others have expressed the view that the weakness of family and neighbourhood ties in modern (or urban) society is compensated for by participation in voluntary associations, but such statements do not constitute proof. According to Kamarevsky (1946 : pp 686-698) the old neighbourhood, the larger kin group, might have been broken down, but they have not been replaced by the specialized voluntary groups to the extent usually assumed. Dotson (1951 : pp 687 - 693 and 1953 : pp 380 - 386) also failed to find a wholesale displacement of primary by secondary groups. He concludes that the majority of urban working class people do not participate in formally organised voluntary associations.

However, two factors which seem to be largely instrumental in the growth of these voluntary associations in cities are : (1) the existence of an urban population which is largely immigrant, unstable and socially heterogeneous, and, (2) the adaptability of traditional institutions to urban conditions. Possibly, it is the existence and interrelationship of these two factors rather than 'anomie' which creates the essential conditions for the 'fictional kinship groups' which according to Wirth,

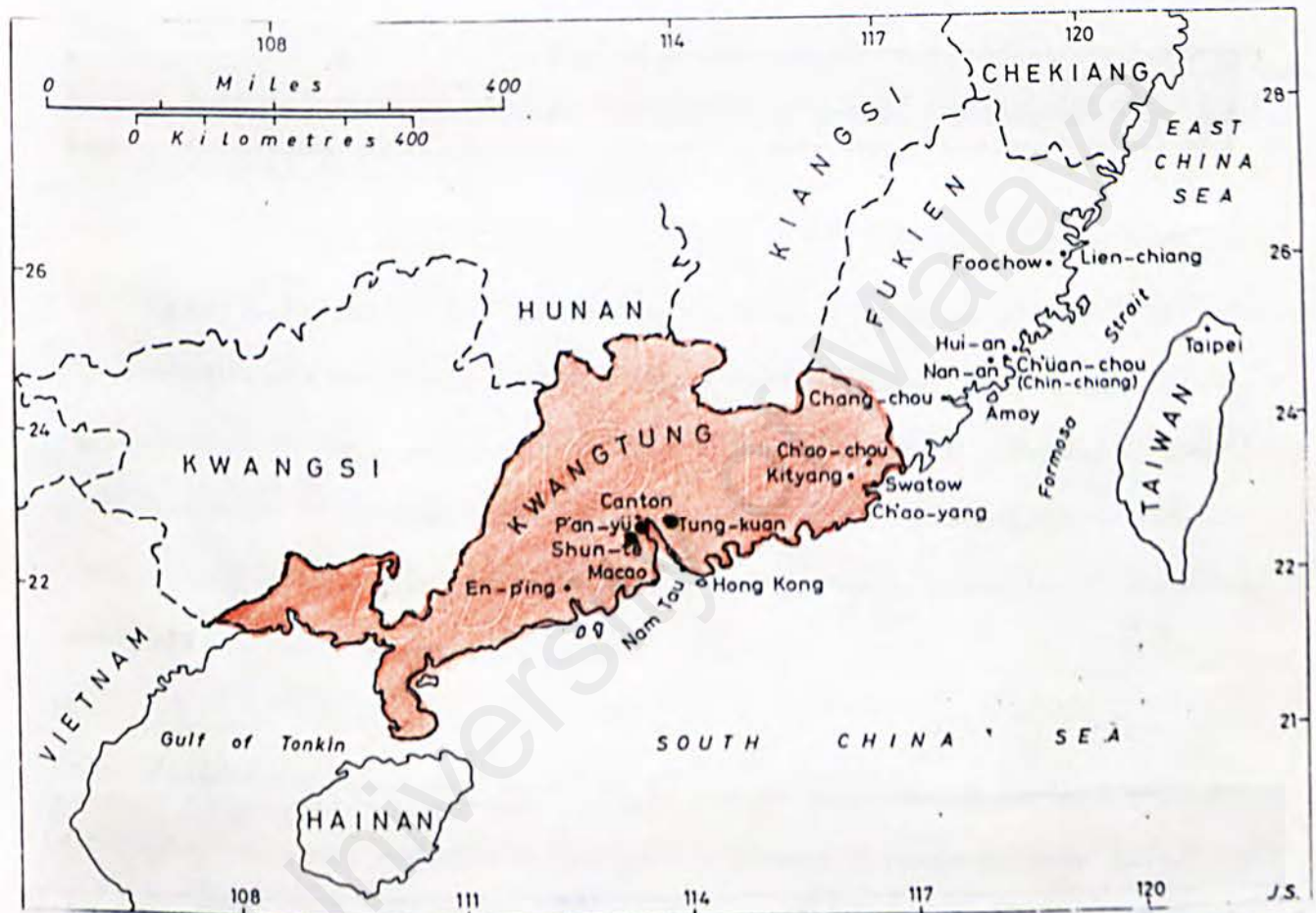
substitute for actual kinship ties within the urban environment. This is found to be true as in the establishment of the Cantonese domestic amahs' associations in Penang. Firstly, eventhough the amahs may come from the province of Kwangtung in China but they originate from different districts. However, the few most predominant groups of Cantonese women immigrants are from the districts of Shun-te, P'an-yu, Tung-kun and Naam Hoi. They are actually of a mixed origin due to the differences in dialects and customs from district to district. Secondly, this type of Cantonese Women's associations has its origin in the 19th century in China when there was a protest against organized marriage in Shun-te district of Kwangtung. This anti-marriage movement eventually forced the Kwangtung authorities to establish special homes for these unattached women because many to them had lost all contact with their fathers and husbands by the time they reached old age.

With the passing of the Alien Ordinance of Malaya in 1933, women's emigration from China was stimulated. Due to the high cost of owning a house individually in Penang, these women set-up their own 'public house' which in actual fact is a replica of the 'special homes for unattached women' in Kwangtung.¹ Hence, the establishment of these 'public house' by Cantonese domestic amahs is not an urban phenomena neither is it caused by 'anomie', but it resembles more of a rural practice or heritage brought to the city of Penang by these rural women.

1.4 Methods of Collecting Data

Fieldwork was the main method used to collect data for the problem

Plate 2 : Map of South-eastern China.



Source : Freedman, M. - Chinese Lineage and Society : Fukien and Kwangtung,
Athlone Press, Univ. of London, 1966.

being studied. Three methods were used i.e, observation, standard questionnaire and informal interview.

Observation were done of events or happenings that have never been subjected to questioning to see how these events were carried out by the people being studied eg. social interaction, social functions, habits and all other aspects related to their daily lives.

Opportunities for participation in these events or even in their daily chores were not available, as the respondents (amahs) do not welcome intrusion or rather interference from a total stranger. Moreover, time constraint in this study also proved to be the major obstacle to the feasibility of the participant observation method. Hence, only sideline observation could be carried out.

Open-ended questions relevant to the problem being studied were prepared. The respondents were given a chance to answer these questions in accordance with her understanding / preference / importance. The aim of using a standard questionnaire is to compare the data collected from each respondent so that the final conclusion would give an exact or near exact picture of the problem being studied.

Informal interview was used with the aim of delving into the problem being studied and to obtain opinion of the respondents about matters that were not stated in the questionnaire. This method is also aimed at testing the validity of the answers given in the questionnaire. It also provides

an opportunity to learn about the history of the 'public house' in general and in particular the 'public house' that the respondents themselves presently live in, based on the narrative recollection of individual respondent.

Photographs were also taken to help illustrate and stress the points made. Tape-recording had to be done since all the amahs interviewed are quite elderly (the youngest is in her late sixties) and information imparted depended on their memory of the past events either witnessed by or experienced by each one of them. Transcription was done with the help of dictionaries i.e. Students Cantonese-English Dictionary by Benard F. Meyer and Theodore, and Mathews Chinese-English Dictionary. Although in some instances it has been possible to use English equivalents for Cantonese / Chinese terms, in others there was no way of translatory in English with sufficient brevity and accuracy for use throughout the text.

The collected data was then processed and analysed. References were also made on books, thesis, magazines and sources which were thought necessary to compare the findings or conclusion drawn. With this, the hypothesis formed can be proved valid or invalid.

1.5 Difficulties encountered during the course of study

The writer encountered quite a number of difficulties in the course of this study. The fieldwork schedule did not work out as smoothly as it was anticipated to, as in the work plan. Amongst the problems encountered were the difficulties in getting the co-operation of 'would-be' respondents.

On the first visit to a 'public house' not recommended by the writer's friend, the writer was refused entrance by the tenants when she announced her intention. At that time, a game of mahjong was going on. To add insult to injuries, the mahjong players propositioned a man who was watching the game cynically to explain what he does during his leisure hours!

On a separate visit to another unrecommended 'public house', where an old lady (an amah) was chopping up some wooden crates, the old lady darted menacing glances at the writer. The old lady looked as if she was ready to strike on the writer the moment the latter open her mouth to say more than introducing herself.

On two occasions when the writer managed to gain entrance into an unrecommended 'public house', these amahs' chatter ceased as they became conscious of the stranger in their midst and an air of suspicion reigned. The appointed spokeswoman had an elbow shafted into her ribs lightly by a fellow tenant when she volunteered to give more information. On one occasion, the writer was also cursed by an amah.

Most of the respondents declined to have their photographs taken. One respondent said that as she is toothless and suffered from falling hairs, she feared that she may appeared to look like a 'fly' in the picture. Another respondent feared that she may fall sick if a photograph of her was taken. At times, they even refuse to have photographs taken of their 'public house'.

These interviews took up a lot of time as a few (less than 5) of these respondents were hard of hearing. Questions had to be repeated slowly and at the top of one's voice. Sometimes there were problems of comprehending what was spoken by the respondents due to the difference in dialect and mumblings or mutterings. At other times, some of the respondents got carried away with their story-telling, hence, the writer has to steer them back into course. This is specially so among the residents of the Old Folks Homes who may have longed for someone from the outside to speak to or it may be due to their long leisure hours.

Data collected depended on the sharpness of each individual respondent's (especially the amahs) memory, their willingness to part with their knowledge and their ability to narrate verbally, thus, making it difficult to assess the validity of any statements made. This is especially so when the questions asked were related to events and situations in the past, since most of these amahs are quite old (late 70s to early 90s).

Unfortunately, members of the 'public house' who are employed could not be interviewed as they only come back occasionally to these 'public house'. On top of that, the live-in amahs do not know when the others will be back.

The writer was told by outsiders (not amahs) who had once rented rooms in the 'public house' that these amahs do not trust outsiders easily as they had in the past, had their hospitality abused by interviewers who published sordid details of their lives when distinctly told not to do so, much to their displeasure. It is said that most of these amahs have not received

any form of formal education and are illiterate, hence, making them suspicious of any interviewer's noble aim, fearing that these interviewers are people sent by the government. Also most of their lives, these amahs spent time among people of their own 'public house' and district, they tend to interpret enquiry into their customs by a stranger as an act of interference and a danger to their way of life.

1.6 Some Definitions

(a) Probable Origin of the word 'Amah'

In the early years in Malaya, when women employed as domestic servants were usually elderly woman, the term 'Ah Sham' (亞孃 - the complimentary title applied to wife of the younger brother by wife of the elder brother) was used as a form of address. But this term was resented by the younger women servants among whom the number of unattached women predominate. This is because the term 'Ah Sham' refers to women who have been married, hence the term 'ma tse' (媽姐) was introduced. The term 'ma tse', in general refers to 'nui yung yan' (女傭人 - all women servants). In order to give the younger servants a place in the social group, it was considered polite to address them as so and so 'tse' (姐, 姊 - elder sister / sisters).

The word 'tse' used in reference to the amahs denotes spinsterhood. Amahs feel very proud to be called 'tse' because they viewed spinsterhood as a symbol of purity. This great feeling was expressed to an extent of celebrating the announcement of their adoption of the faith of spinsterhood. This ceremony is a solemn one and the special dressing of their hair in a plait is the sign of 'shoh hei' (comb up) or denoting spinsterhood.

However there are different forms of addressing a domestic servant depending on the kind of work she does. Three most common form of address are 'shai poh' (使婆), 'uet poh' (月婆) and 'naai ma' (奶媽 - wet nurse). A 'shai poh' is one who is employed to do general chores in the household. 'Shai' means employ, to use, to send, to order, to cause, and 'poh' refers to an old lady, a step-mother, mother-in-law. Whereas a 'uet poh' is a more specific kind of domestic servant. She is employed during a woman's after delivery confinement and employed later as an ordinary amah.

Most of these domestic servants generally took objection to being addressed as 'amah' especially so when they were addressed by a Chinese employer. This may be because the amah saw herself more as a retainer than hired help. She hoped to become as much a part of the family as the hierlooms. By addressing her as 'amah' it is implied that she is outrightly denied of this privilege and that she is alienated from the family. Nevertheless, the amahs are more commonly known or addressed as 'amah' by their Western employers eventhough at times when some of these Western employers who have knowledge of the amahs' dislike for this term, use their name (the amah's) as a form of address. However, these domestic servants preferred the term 'kung yan' (working people or manual or menial worker). Usually an individual amah is addressed as 'tse'.

The term 'amah' may have derived from Cantonese phonetic 'ah ma' which is usually used by children to address their old maid servants. Whereas the term 'ma tse' is usually used to refer to unmarried women

who usually work as 'taai K'am tse' (大齡姐 - A woman who leads and guides the bride in the observance of religious rites and customs; and any other rites as required by the bride's parents and the bridegroom's parents, and who accompanies the bride to thank the individual guest), domestic servants, hawkers, procuresses of prostitutes.

But according to an English-Chinese Standard Dictionary (1908), 'amah' or 'ama' is a noun. In olden China, some Chinese mothers of poor family after giving birth do not breast feed their own children, but instead get into employment in a rich family as 'naai ma'. Their duty is to breast feed the employer's children. A 'naai ma' means somewhat the same as a wet nurse. The term 'amah' should refer to females who suckles a child or looks after a child. But often it is commonly used to refer to females doing domestic work such as : washing, cooking, looking after or caring for babies or children and similar jobs of the domestic nature.

In olden China especially in the Shun-te and P'an-yu districts, women prefer not to marry. These women had gone through certain religious ceremony and avowed not to marry during their lifetime. Hence, those who work as domestic servants were referred to as 'ma tse'. People have often mistaken that all maid servants belong to the 'ma tse' group.

The term 'amah' used in this study is in accordance with the daily usage and have the same meaning as a domestic servants.

(b) Legal definition of the term 'domestic amahs'

Domestic amahs in this study refers to those females who work or have worked in a family home either as a cook, wash-woman, baby-minder, or other work of a domestic nature; and who if married are not living with their husband and children; and who belong to a 'public house' ('kung sz uk' or 'tsz mool uk') to which they return during their unemployment period and whose birth place is China.

Employment Ordinance No. 39 of 1955 Federation of Malaya referred to the domestic servants as "a person employed in connection with the work of a private dwelling house and not in connection with any trade, business, or profession carried out by the employer in such dwelling house; and includes a cook, butler, child's nurse, valet, footman, gardener, washerman or washerwoman, watchman, groom and driver or cleaner of any vehicle licensed for private use."

Domestic servants under the Labour Ordinance (1936) of the Colony of Singapore (Cap. 69) refer to "any house, stable or garden servant employed in or in connection with the domestic services of any public or private dwelling house or eating-house and includes a motorcar driver, but does not include Indians being immigrants as define in section 72 employed on such services in estates as defined in section 143. The Labour Ordinance has application to domestic servants in so far as contract of services is concerned.

Workmen's Compensation Ordinance (Law of the Colony of Singapore 1955

edition) does not apply to domestic servants, thus, she cannot claim any compensation from her employer should she injure herself in the course of her work. This Ordinance defines a domestic servant as "a person employed exclusively in the work or in connection with the work of a private dwelling house and not in any trade, business or profession carried on by the employer in such dwelling house and includes a cook, house servant (including bedroom and kitchen servants), waiter, butler, child's or baby's nurse, valet, footman, gardener, washerman or washerwoman, watchman, groom and driver or cleaner of any vehicle licensed for private use."

(c) Voluntary Associations

Though voluntary associations in the cities have many features similar to those in villages, but they differ in that initially they serve only as substitutes for the traditional institutions with which the migrant has lost touch (Jean Rouch : 1963 : pp 300 - 304 & 1959; Thomas L. Hodgkin : 1956 : pp 127; Kenneth Little : 1965)

Definitions of the term 'voluntary associations' as it applies to organizations in modern societies, differ widely, but generally contains three key elements. A voluntary association is an organized group of persons : (1) that is formed in order to further some common interests of its members, (2) in which membership is voluntary in the sense that it is neither mandatory nor acquired through birth, and (3) that exists independently of the state (Encyclopedia of Social Science : Vol. 16 : pp 360 - 363).

The term 'voluntary associations' as used in this study is based on the three key elements mentioned above.

NOTES

1. For further elaborations, see Marjorie Topley - 'Chinese Women's

Vegetarian Houses in Singapore' in Journal of Malayan Branch Royal

Asiatic Studies 27 : 51 - 67.

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and rice fields were the commonest agricultural land and rice was at least ideally, the staple food. Some three quarter of the total area of the two provinces under food crops was devoted to rice (Maurice Freedman : 1958 : pp 9). While China was not a country of large estates worked by tenants or labourers, it has often been pointed out that there was considerable concentration of landownership. According to Freedman (1958 : pp 15) data for Kwangtung relating to 1933 shows landlords making up 2 percent of the families and owning 55 percent of the land; rich peasants making up 4 percent of the families and 15 percent of the land; middle peasants making up 30 percent of the families and owning 15 percent of the land; and poor peasants making up 14 percent of the families but owning only 19 percent of the land! Although it appears true that pressure of over-population is the dominant factor accounting for Chinese emigration, there is no reason why the emigrants should on this one account have come from Kwangtung and Fukien than from other provinces where the pressure was, if anything, greater.

It is difficult to say when the settlements of Chinese in the Malayan Archipelago first began. Fu Hsien who landed in A.D 414 in Java, did not

2. THE RISE OF THE AMAH IN MALAYA : A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The overseas Chinese are almost exclusively drawn from the South-eastern provinces of Kwangtung, Fukien and Kwangsi but the great majority from the first two provinces. For this fact, the most obvious reason is pressure of population (Victor Purcell : 1967 : pp 1). China as a whole has been an overwhelmingly agrarian state, those who lived in its villages were nearly all in some way connected with land and its working. In Fukien and Kwangtung, irrigated rice fields were the commonest agricultural land and rice was at least ideally, the staple food. Some three quarter of the total area of the two provinces under food crops were devoted to rice (Maurice Freedman : 1958 : pp 9). While China was not a country of large estates worked by tenants or labourers, it has often been pointed out that there was considerable concentration of landownership. According to Freedman (1958 : pp 15) data for Kwangtung relating to 1933 shows landlords making up 2 percent of the families and owning 53 percent of the land; rich peasants making up 4 percent of the families and 13 percent of the land; middle peasants making up 20 percent of the families and owning 15 percent of the land; and poor peasants making up 14 percent of the families but owning only 19 percent of the land! Although it appears true that pressure of over-population is the dominant factor accounting for Chinese emigration, there is no reason why the emigrants should on this one account have come from Kwangtung and Fukien than from other provinces where the pressure was, if anything, greater¹.

It is difficult to say when the settlements of Chinese in the Malayan Archipelago first began. Pa Haien who landed in A.D 414 in Java, did not

mention that he found any of his countrymen there. During the great trading era under the T'ang dynasty (618 - 908 A.D), travel routes became better known (Tachen : 1923 : pp 52). Hence, at the end of the Tang period, early settlers were established on the north coast of Java. European who could not adapt themselves to the customs of the natives discovered that the Chinese, whom they found living there, were very useful in their relations with the natives. Before long they became intermediaries between the foreigners and the natives. The Chinese were moreover much more industrious than the natives and immigration was therefore encouraged by every means.

During the Ming dynasty (1368 - 1643 A.D) according to Duyvendak (1927 : pp 1 - 15) the islands in Naam Yeung (south seas) as they called it in Chinese had already been of an importance to the Chinese emigrants. But especially in the second half of the seventeenth century, the unrest which was the result of the Manchu conquest in China, drove many emigrants to these parts. The emigrants settled largely in the coastal towns and their prosperity continued to encourage many others in China to undertake the venture.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, partly as the result of the turmoil caused by the Taiping Rebellion, great numbers were added to those already living in the islands of Naam yeung. The proximity of the south-eastern maritime provinces and the close similarity of their climates to the Malayan made it easier for emigrants to reach them and easier for them to adapt to the conditions when they arrived. It was only after 1786

when the British began to make settlements in the Malay Peninsula that the Chinese found a welcome.

Once the stream had started it would tend to flow from the same source and the jealousy of tribes already settled would be likely to keep out all tribes from other provinces. But on the whole, we are compelled to fall back on the explanation that the superior enterprise of the Cantonese and Hokkiens rather than the mere pressure of over-population which accounts for their predominance overseas. It must be admitted, however that there has been a considerable number of refugee criminals among the emigrants².

Those involved in the earlier emigration are mainly men, and emigration of women from China only started extensively during 1930s. To understand this, it is appropriate to delve into the social conditions of Chinese women in China, which provided the main thrust in the anti-marriage movement in the late nineteenth century in the Shun-te district in Kwangtung.

In olden China there was a saying that "a woman's work is never done". Where mechanization has not been introduced to undertake the primary processes of manufacturing, care of silkworms, picking and spinning and weaving of cotton were introduced to the girls at a very early age. Girls must be an expert in these employment in order to be acceptable to the family of her mother-in-law. Hence, a demeaning appellation was given to the girls generally, that of 'ya-t'ou' or 'slave girl' was used as 'daughter' (Arthur H. Smith : 1969 : pp 261). Most Chinese girls never go anywhere away from their home and live what is literally the existence of 'a frog in a well'.

Ten of thousands of them had never been two miles away from their village in which they were born in. Girls stayed at home until the time when their parents thought fit to arrange for their marriage. Educating a girl would be considered preposterous because it is considered futile comparable to "weeding the field of some other man", or to use another analogy "like putting a gold chain around the neck of someone else's puppy" (A. H. Smith : 1969 : pp 264). It proverbially mean, a man who when marrying off his daughter wants to be paid for the food he has wasted upon her up to the date of marriage. The assumptions of Chinese society then is that, the body of the girl is for which the parents are responsible and not the mind. To almost any Chinese in those days, it would probably appear a self-evident proposition that to spend time, strength and much more money in educating the daughter-in-law of someone else is a sheer waste. Time and time again the wise old men of China repeated "A woman too well educated is apt to create trouble" or "A woman without talents is virtuous". Hence, the education of most Chinese girls has been banished from human thought for a span of some milleniums.

Early betrothals for girls was a custom in those days. Marriages are arranged by a go-between and the betrothed couple never met before the beginning of the marriage ceremony. If the boy become a gambler, a profligate or dissipates in any other way, there is no retreat for the family of the girl, no matter to what extremities they may be driven. A woman's world is her home and she has no property rights. Even if she should earn some money by weaving, spinning or embroidery, it went to the head of the family - her father if she were not married and her father-in-law if she

was married - and only he could dispose of it. After marriage, a woman comes under the authority of her mother-in-law in all domestic matters. A great deal too is heard of the tyranny and cruelty of these mother-in-laws. It assumes all varieties and forms, from incessant scolding up to the most cruel treatment. A husband might even side with his mother if he is a filial son, and the only consolation for the wife was the fact that she would herself one day be a mother-in-law and would have similar powers over her son's wife.

One of the weakest part of the Chinese social fabric is the insecurity and lack of happiness for the women. In the late 19th century, almost every year, thousands upon thousands of Chinese wives commit suicide (SMITH : 1969 pp. 287). All this is the outcome of the Confucian theory that a wife has no rights which a husband is bound to respect. The law affords her no protection while she lives, and such justice as she is able with difficulty to extract is strictly a post-mortem concession.

The reality of the evils of the Chinese marriage system is evidenced by the extreme expedients to which unmarried girls sometimes resort, to avoid matrimony. Chinese newspapers not infrequently contain references to this practice e.g. in an article 'Suicide as A Virtue' in Shih Pao (SMITH : 1969 : pp. 289) referred to some organized societies of young maidens who solemnly vow never to wed. It is not surprising then, that many women of all classes feared marriages, particularly the peasant women, who, since her husband's family would not likely to have servants, would have to work much harder under her mother-in-law's stern eyes. In some parts of Kwangtung

province, young girls before they are married all sleep together in a girl's village dormitory and it has been told by women from these areas that when a girl leaves to marry, she was mourned by other girls in the dormitory as if she was going to her funeral.

In peasant families, the number of persons living in one hut was often smaller than obtained among the upper classes. A woman's position as a worker and a supplementer of her family income would be expected to be higher than in a large family with more male members and more money and land. In South China, this fact was the case, especially in Kwangtung and Fukien provinces where women from time immemorial have worked in the fields, and as a coolie, and have done other manual tasks. They have never accepted foot-binding on such a large scale as in the North and their protest against the old marriage system have been louder. As they were with men, providers of the family's income, the parent's of these women often found it more profitable to keep them at home as long as they wish to stay rather than marry them off and lose a valuable source of income, as well as having to expend a considerable amount of money on their wedding celebration.

Although these Southern Chinese women's protest against the marriage system has always been more vocal than that of the women in the North, until late 19th century it never took the form of any attack on the root problems of the system or any attempt to change it. They merely refused to marry, preferring to support themselves at home or elsewhere with their incomes. In late nineteenth century, in the Shun-te district of Kwangtung, a protest against marriage was organized. Many girls joined a movement called the

"Girls who do not go to the family" (不落家). These girls who vowed never to marry go through certain rites to become a "tsz shoh nui (self-comber) or either refused to live with their husbands after marriage, remaining virgins and living together in girl's home. They cannot be found living in their parent's home now that they are married in the eyes of the law and, thus, are now considered member of their husband's family. These woman who refused to consummate the marriage are referred to as 'pat lok ka' (不落家 - Girls who do not go to the family) or 'm lok ka' (唔樂嫁 - not happy to marry). The Kwangtung authorities eventually were forced to establish special homes for these unattached women because many of them had lost all contact with their fathers and husbands by the time that they reached old age. Most of these girls were workers in the silk factories and had their own earnings to live on. In other districts too, where women worked for their living, even after marriage, many left home to work as servants in towns.

These anti-marriage organizations in their early history derived their strength from the fact that in the district of Shun-te, women could work for financial remuneration in the silk factories when in other parts of the country, little opportunity existed for women to support themselves and contribute to the support of their families. Later, the movement spread to P'an - yu where factories making towels and flanners developed and employed large numbers of women. Dyer Ball points out the contrast found between the situation of women employment outside their home existing in Kwangtung and in other provinces (1900). In the city of Canton and the neighbouring regions, women were seen working in the fields, streets, on the rivers and seas and engaged in various kinds of manual labours; in other parts of China

there was a marked absence of women in outside employment. In 1887, employment of labour in the silk industries in the district of Shun-te became almost entirely female (Ta chen : 1933). In 1933 Ta chen on a statistical analysis of industrial labour in China gave the distribution of male and female labour for the main regions of Kwangtung as follows (1933) :

Place	Male	%	Female	%	Child	%
Shun-te	3,832	7.0	44,228	81.2	6,389	11.7
Foo Shan	9,296	53.7	6,995	40.4	1,008	5.8
Ch'ao An	2,486	32.9	3,947	52.4	1,105	14.7
Swatow	3,465	50.4	2,204	32.1	1,202	17.5
Total	19,079	22.1	57,374	66.6	9,704	11.3

According to Ta chen, Kwangtung at that time had the highest percentage of women workers although not absolute numbers of such workers.

Although the new Marriage Code brought in by The Republic did away with many of the evils of the traditional marriage system, the fears and the prejudice against marriage remained. Many of the women who preferred to remain single or to leave their husbands eventually found their way to Malaya where they obtained work as servants or in the rubber estates and tin mines. The spate of female emigration was probably due to the slump in the silk industry in China owing to the widespread use of rayon (Purcell : 1967 pp 200) and also because women were exempted from the Malayan immigration

quota imposed by the 1933 Alien Ordinance of Malaya.

The said Ordinance was passed to restrict immigration of all adult males of all classes, with the aim of regulating the admission of aliens in accordance with the political, social and economic needs for the moment of the various administrations in Malaya. Immigrants was selected on qualitative basis. Under the Ordinance, a system of monthly quota for alien deck passengers, to be fixed by Governor in Council, was established. Since women were outside the quota, there was no lessening in the number of women entering Malaya. Women's emigration was in fact stimulated by ticket brokers in the Chinese ports who refused to sell quota tickets to lodging houses where emigrants waited to embark, until three or four non-quota tickets were bought. Thus, the lodging houses' owners encouraged women to emigrate. A large number of these women were the very women who in China had declined to marry, or were unhappily married, and who saw, in going to the South Seas, a chance to get away from relatives or in-laws who might cause troubles if they were merely to break away from their families and stay in their own district and work. Shiploads of Cantonese women mostly from the Shun-te, Tung-kun and P'an-yu districts came to Malaya. Their age range from 18 - 40 years.

From 1934 - 38, unrestricted female immigration into Malaya caused a migrational surplus of 190,000 female Chinese deck passengers, the majority of whom were peasant women (Freedman : JGBIRAS : Vol. 80). Hence, it became necessary to restrict the entry of women also, and this restriction i.e. a monthly quota of 500 was consequently imposed shortly before the start of

Table 1 : Number of females per 1000 male immigrants among the various dialect group in 1931.

	Hokkiens	%	Cantonese	%	Khehs	%	Teochius	%	Total
S.S	533	26.7	717	35.9	410	20.5	336	16.8	1996
F.M.S	347	25.8	378	28.0	412	30.6	209	15.5	1346
Johor	322	31.3	259	25.2	207	20.1	241	23.4	1029
Kedah	374	33.7	325	29.3	267	24.0	143	12.9	1109
Total	1576	28.7	1679	30.6	1296	23.6	929	17.0	5480

Source : Purcell, V. The Chinese in Malaya, 1967, pp. 199.

Table 2 : Age of interviewed amahs on their arrival in Malaya.

Age (years)	Number	%
20 - 29	23	50
30 - 39	20	43.5
40 - 49	3	6.5
Total	46	100.0

There are many prevailing customs in the province of Kwangtung in older China. These customs can be said to be the outcome of the belief among these unattached Cantonese³ women who regard marriage as something horrid, and believing that their married lives would be miserable and unholy. The establishment of these institutions and practices may be said to be a way in which these unattached women expressed their anti-marriage sentiments.

the Second World War.

Some of these women came instead of their men-folks who could not come because of the quota restrictions, to earn money for their families and with the intention of returning to China but a large number never do so. In 1938, the Malayan Government put a ban on the entry of Chinese women shortly before the start of the Pacific War. By this time, many of these Chinese women had created extensive economic ties and interests, and the guaranteed protection of these by a paternal government naturally made them reluctant to leave Malaya, and abandon the fruits of many years of labour. Life, even for the women labourers, was very much easier in the rapidly developing Peninsula than in the over-crowded villages in China. Finally, the immobilization of traffic between South China and Malaya over the period from the beginning of the Japanese Occupation of the South Chinese ports in 1937 to the end of the Pacific War, and the Communist conquest of China in 1949, forced many Chinese who would normally have returned to their homeland to stay on, and at the same time, fostered and strengthened the economic and social bonds holding them to Malaya.

2.1 Institutions and Practices of the Unattached Cantonese Women

There are many prevailing customs in the province of Kwangtung in olden China. These customs can be said to be the outcome of the belief among these unattached Cantonese³ women who regard marriage as something horrid, and believing that their married lives would be miserable and unholy. The establishment of these institutions and practices may be said to be a way in which these unattached women expressed their anti-marriage sentiments.

Table 3 : Reasons for coming to Malaya.

To seek employment because :	Number	%
Widowhood - need to support family	11	23.9
Single - help to support family	16	34.8
Single - living conditions (financially) were unsatisfactory back in China	19	41.3
Total	46	100.0

Table 4 : The sex ratio among Chinese in the Straits Settlements.

	Female	Male	%
1891	153	1000	15.3
1911	247	1000	24.7
1931	513	1000	51.3
1947	815	1000	81.5

Source : OOI, Jin Bee Land, People and Economy in Malaya, 1969, pp. 123.

Amongst the common types of institutions and practices are :-

(a) 'Shoh hei' or 'Tsz shoh'

The term 'Shoh hei' literally means 'to comb upwards' whereas 'tsz shoh' means 'to comb (the hair) by oneself'. Nevertheless these two terms are used synonymously to refer to a ceremony in which women take the vow never to marry, and to renounce men completely from their lives. These women became known as 'tsz shoh nui' (self-comber or women who comb or dress their own hair). In traditional Chinese society, after a woman married, her single plait of hair was bound up into a bun or coiffure. The 'tsz shoh nui' puts her hair up herself to indicate that she is "as if" married and after this cannot be betrothed to anybody. It is theoretically after the 'shoh hei' ceremony that 'tsz shoh nui' status is bound to be recognised 'officially' as it were, by the rest of the society. The actual ceremony of 'shoh hei' may at times not take place for several years after the vow not to marry has been taken because of the enormous expenses needed. It is more commonly performed together by pairs of sworn sisters. The vow can be taken either in a temple or in the front of the individual's house before a table of lighted joss-sticks and candles and plates of fruits. In the latter, the vow is made before Heaven and Earth. In either case, friends and relatives may be present.

Some districts in China consider a girl who is not married by the age of eighteen an 'old maid' or 'lo nui', and is looked down by the village sisters. They will nickname her 'faan kut nui' (反骨女 - backbite daughter), thus the parents lose face. But in the Shun-te district, a 'tsz

shoh nui' is respected and her parents gained prestige. A 'tsz shoh nui' normally leaves her parents to lead an independent living. If she should remain too long with her parents, she would be teased by her village sisters as boneless and reliant on her parents. For a girl to be a 'tsz shoh nui', she must 'tsz tsok tsz k'ap (自作自給 - work and support oneself). If the girl is betrothed, she get married but practised abstinence from marital relationship.

For 'shoh hei' ceremony, a fortune teller must be consulted for choosing an auspicious day. On this day a party or feast is held whereby guest are requested to bring presents whether in the form of material or cash (hung pau i.e. red packet containing money). The 'shoh hei' ceremony is an elaborate affair. Part of the prerequisite of the occasion was a "trousseau" which consisted of various kinds of valuable hair ornaments made of jade and gold to dress the new bun / coiffure.

It is difficult to get any agreement among the 'tsz shoh nui' as to the correct practice, since the custom associated with this movement has slight variations from place to place in Kwangtung. However, it is more commonly said that : sworn sisters were dressed in white trousers and jackets and at a gathering of 'tsz shoh' sisters took their joint vow of celibacy before the image of Goddess Koon Yam (Goddess of Mercy). The mistress of ceremonies usually an elderly 'tsz shoh nui' i.e. the oldest of the sisterhood stands besides them. She then recites some verses and began plaiting the girls' hair (one after another) into a coiffure or 'kai' (髻). Afterwards when it is completed, tea was offered by the couple to everybody present in

Plate 3 : A coiffure that used to be worn or may still be worn by some amahs today.



Customs : A girl is not allowed to marry before her elder brother unless the girl's brother's parents press. The order of preference for marriage in Chinese society is based on the principle of seniority. If the brother remains a bachelor, the girl becomes a 'lo mai' (old maid), hence she prefer to 'tan-shoh', then to be agonized by women from the village girls. There are also some women who remained unmarried because of superstitious notions of society. "Tiger Women", that is women born in the year of the tiger, of the Chinese almanac, are considered to make bad wives and bring misfortune on the new family they enter. Each individual is according to the Chinese calendar,

imitation of a bridal couple who offer tea to the assembled relatives at the wedding. It is really like a marriage ceremony and the couple swear everlasting friendship and mutual help. When a partner of such union dies, the other must carry the banner or fan, at her funeral ceremonies. This is a paper streamer on a bamboo pole normally carried by the eldest son or eldest son of the eldest son as an indication of the latter's future role as head of the ancestor worship. The 'tsz shoh' is an irrevocable step. One must not marry after that. The fear which a 'tsz shoh nui' has of breaking her vow is not terror of the possible wrath of vengeful dieties as in the case of religious vow but of social disgrace and ostracism.

However it would be an incomplete truth to say that all amah become 'tsz shoh nui' because their wish was to abstain from marriage. An amah may become a 'tsz shoh nui' due to the restriction underlining the women's freedom in those days. It is said that a girl can only leave her parents for a strange land if she is betrothed to be married to a man living there or had become a 'tsz shoh nui'. It may also due to the existing marriage customs : A girl is not allowed to marry before her elder brother unless the girl's brethothal's parents press. The order of preference for marriage in Chinese society is based on the principle of seniority. If the brother remains a bachelor, the girl becomes a 'lo nui' (old maid), hence she prefer to 'tsz shoh', then to be agonized by teases from the village girls. There are also some women who remained unmarried because of superstitious notions of society. "Tiger Women", that is women born in the year of the tiger, of the Chinese almanac, are considered to make bad wives and bring misfortune on the new family they enter. Each individual is according to the Chinese calendar,

associated with some animal and on the principle of some animal eat up other animals and therefore those individuals associated with some animals are incompatible to those associated with others (SIT : 1983 : pp. 44)

(b) 'Pat lok ka' or 'M lok ka' (Women who are not happy to marry)

A young woman faces a crisis when she wants to become a 'tsz shoh nui' but her parents command her to marry. In such a dilemma, she can resort to a strange rule which satisfies both her parents and herself. She will undergo a 'marriage' ceremony with a man, but by agreement beforehand, she will not consummate the marriage. In other words, she is a 'pat lok ka' or 'm lok ka'. She will remain with her parents on the third day of her marriage or 'saam chiu ooi moon' while the husband returns to his parent's home. She then enters the 'ma tse' profession (unattached women in domestic services).

During the three days in the husband's household, it was required by the vows of the sisterhood, that the new bride should not take any food or drink which had not been brought in from outside for her. If, as was often the case, she visited her husband's family afterwards once a year to pay her respects or went back for mourning ceremonies for a mother-in-law or father-in-law, she had still to continue to refuse all food that she had not brought with her. The taking of food and drink in the house of a woman's in-laws and supplied by the household was tantamount to her acceptance of permanent residence and she thereupon lost her membership to her sisterhood.

For the marriage ceremonies, the bridal costume of a member of a

sisterhood was sewn for her by fellow members. It is said that the bride-to-be would sometimes be literally sewn into her clothes, the purpose being to preserve her virginity. She would be warned to eat only certain foods which would prevent the necessity of bodily elimination for the duration of her stay away from home. She would be warned to stay awake while in her husband's presence. If after three days were up, and when she returned home her clothes were found to be still intact, she was considered to have passed the test and could remain a member.

Some women who contracted to this strange wedding in China have come to Malaya to work. She will slave for years to save enough money to buy or redeem her 'freedom' from the man. Sometimes all the members of a sisterhood assist such member in her bid to redeem her freedom. Such sisterhoods were known as 'maai foo ooi' (societies for buying (off) the husband). The money will be used as a dowry to obtain a new, and this time a genuine bride for the man and to cover other expenses as a form of compensation. The second bride is usually a 'mooi tsai' (slave girl). The first wife also send money home to China periodically to the husband. Since no divorce or separation is recognized in the Chinese society of olden China, the 'pat lok ka' remains as the principal wife, and hence, shall be treated so by her immediate family. The children of the second wife are considered to be her children too and she can exercise her rights on them should she return to China.

(c) 'Shap tsz mooi' (Ten sisters)

The word 'shap' in Cantonese means 'ten' but 'Shap tsz mooi' does not necessarily refer to a group or sisterhood consisting of exactly ten or so

called 'sisters'. It refers to any number of males who form themselves into so-called 'sister group'.

Plate 4 : 'Shap tsz moo' residence. This is the only one that was came across in the fieldwork.



called 'sisters'. It refers to any number of amahs who form themselves into so-called 'sister group'.

The 'shap tsz moo' (ten sisters) group is permitted to marry but custom stipulated they should resist any attempts by their husbands to consummate the marriage during the first, second and third years of their married lives. On the third day (saam chui ooi moon), the bride may stay with her parents until she decides to 'lok ka' (consummate the marriage). If after three years she is still in the village, she would be stipulated by customs to return to her husband. But if she decides to leave the village to lead an independent life or living, she would get her husband a secondary wife as a compensation and she continues to remain the principal wife all her life. To maintain chastity and to support her husband and children, and to maintain continuity in his family lineage were acts admired and respected and highly esteemed.

(d) 'Kit paai tsz moo' (Sworn sisters)

The term 'kit paai' means to pledge in a sworn brotherhood or sisterhood. Sworn sisterhood was the basic relationship to the anti-marriage movement in Kwangtung. A pair of girls, usually who have grown-up together and about the same age, would take mutual vows never to marry and never to part company. They pledged themselves to help each other as natural sisters would help each other during their lifetime. This vow is usually taken before the image of Koon Yam (Goddess of Mercy) and a ceremony would mark the occasion.

Sworn sisterhoods or friendships between women are called "kam lan" (golden orchid friendships) in symbolic of two friends who would never change their feelings for each other : the orchid too, has lasting fragrance and symbolises the lasting 'fragrance' of friendship. Sometimes the term 'sheung kit paai' (a pair tied in prayer) or 'paai sheung chi' (to venerate or respect knowledge of each other) may be used to refer to a sworn friendship between two girls.

(e) 'Nui uk' (Girls' Home)

In certain districts in China, some girls when they grow to a certain age (normally twelve years old), go to sleep in the so-called 'nui uk' separated from their own parents. Only unmarried girls were allowed in that house and they were all from the same village. They did not necessarily spend the whole day there. Usually they return to their own homes during the day to work at home or in the field and go back to the 'nui uk' after their evening meal.

The girls came mainly from the poor homes because of lack of privacy and accommodation in their own home. Parents of the poor homes readily allowed their daughters to sleep in the 'nui uk'. Owner of the 'nui uk' is normally an old lady or a respected widow and have children living separate from herself. This old lady feels lonely, thus, invites girls over to stay. The girls paid nothing whatsoever when living in the 'nui uk'.

Girls learn sewing, stitching, sometimes reading the old classics among themselves. On festivals, the girls bring something edible for the old lady.

Usually they help to tidy up the house and other domestic works. The girls can stay in the 'nui uk' as long as the old lady lives there or invites them or until they get married. Girls provide their own blanket, pillow, mat or share with others.

In the Naam Hoi districts, 'nui uk' is built from donations by villagers who are either living in the village itself or in Naam-yeung (South Seas). The 'nui uk' becomes the property of 'Ah Kung' (ancestors or clans) and is maintain by 'Ah Kung', which means funds from the income of properties belonging to the ancestors. The villagers in order of seniority in generation, take turn to look after the properties and keep accounts of the incomes and expenditures.

All girls in the village had at some time of their girlhood to be admitted to the 'nui uk'. If not, she would not on her wedding day have any of the village sisters to attend her wedding or help her in the preparation for her marriage. She will be ostracised by them.

In the 'nui uk' they learn social etiquette, manners, obedient to their respective parents and elders and some duties of a wife to her husband, religious rites and customs handed down.

(f) 'Tsz mooi uk' (Sisters' House)

The unattached women in the Shun-te district contributes to these houses with expectation of staying there when they have no other place to go when they return to China in their old age. Funds for the establishment of

Table 5 : The presence of 'nui uk' in the village of each individual amah.

	Number	%
Presence of 'nui uk'	37	80.4
Absence of 'nui uk'	9	19.6
Total	46	100.0

Table 6 : Amahs who at one time or another had stayed in a 'nui uk'.

	Number	%
Stayed in a 'nui uk' before	37	80.4
Have not stayed in a 'nui uk' before.	9	19.6
Total	46	100.0

The purpose of the 'tai mui uk' is to give the master amahs a place to live in when they grow old and incapable of working when they return to China and no place or home to go to, or if they had trouble with their daughter-in-law and prefer to live separately. For the unmarried amahs,

these houses depend on the women from the village who are working in Malaya and who contribute towards their construction and maintenance. Once a 'tsz mooi uk' is built, other sisters could still join in with their contributions or donations. There is no limit to the fund to be collected and limit to membership.

The money saved or being kept for several years before it is being use to build the 'tsz mooi uk' is used to enter one or two or more 'ngan ooi' (tontines). When the target is reached, contributions stopped. The sister who gave the most money had the final say in the matter relating to the proposed 'tsz mooi uk'. Only those wishing to be head meet in a temple, usually Goddess of Mercy. Each of them would light some joss-sticks and 'tim yau' (adding oil to the temple lamp) before the Goddess, pray and then throw the 'ka pue' (a divining instrument) three times and each time followed by a prayer. The sisters who got the most 'sing pue' (God's favourable or affirmative) or who was the first to get the 'sing pue' consecutively three times would be chosen the head for the year and the remaining sisters would have their turn the following years. There is no real cash to be kept by any head as the money is used to enter some 'ngan ooi' or tontine. The head only collects the contributions from the member sisters and use the money to enter some secure 'ooi'.

The purpose of the 'tsz mooi uk' is to give the member sisters a place to live in when they grow old and incapable of working when they return to China and no place or house to go to; or if they had trouble with their daughter-in-law and prefer to live separately. For the unmarried amahs,

they might not agree with their sister-in-laws or brothers for one reason or another. Those amahs living in the 'tsz mooi uk' who had either spent all their savings during the period on their own maintenance or contributed their savings to the 'tsz mooi uk' fund, would be supported by the income from the paddy fields if the 'tsz mooi uk' have such properties.

If a non-member amah wish to join the 'tsz mooi uk', she will have to pay a small initial contribution, and the amount depends on the circumstances of each individual amah. The 'tsz mooi uk' would be in the charge of the amah who had either made the highest contribution or was the oldest inmate then alive in the 'tsz mooi uk'. When the 'tsz mooi uk' requires repairs, the inmate in-charge of it would inform the sisters in Malaya by sending a letter addressed to anyone of them, usually the one known to her personally.

(g) Lesbianism

It is alleged by some researchers (Peplow : 1931 and SIT : 1983) that lesbianism was practised by some amahs. However it is unfortunate and difficult to assess the extent to which the 'tsz shoh' movement, custom of 'pat lok ka' and sworn sisterhood were associated with lesbianism both in Kwangtung and in Malaya. A detailed investigation into the circumstances and practices of lesbianism was not feasible at the time when this study was carried out and it is doubtful whether such an investigation could be carried out without 'participant observation'.

However, it is alleged that such relationships seemed fairly common among women up to the age of about 40 years. Lesbianism is known colloquially

in Cantonese as 'moh tau foo' (grinding the bean curd). Such a couple is known as 'seong chee' (two with a mutual understanding).

The pair either two widows or two young girls live together very intimately, and share everything. This vow of the 'kai seong chi' society which literally means 'confidant', is sometimes taken publicly with all the formality of a wedding, including the feast. The 'kai seong chi' society recognises such 'marriages' (SIT : 1983 : pp 113 and PELOW : 1931 : pp 117).

This practice is said to originate from Shun-te district and is most common in that district especially in Tai Leung city. However, among the widows the relationship has a tendency to be an unwholesome one, but among the young girls there is merely a vow of celibacy implying no more than closest friendship and sisterhood. It was said that such practice which was widely adopted among the girl employees of the Shun-te silk factories was much more common among them than among widows. Membership of 'kai seong chee' society was considered a serious obstacles to marriage not so much on account of the possibility of an abnormal relationship, as because the other party to the vow becomes an enemy and a source of danger and may even commit suicide.

There is a belief among the 'seong chee' that lesbians are women who were meant to be born as men into this world but that there had been some sort of technical hitch at the last minute. It is believed that in the next incarnation they will certainly be men.

All these practices and institutions were practised by the amahs in China before it came under the Communist Government's rule. In the present days, much of it if not all of the practices had been rendered obsolete along with the 'winds of change'. What little of these practices that are still surviving among the amahs in Malaya, have indeed been modified to suit their new environment.

NOTES

1. J. L. L. Duyvendak - 'Chinese in the Dutch East Indies' in Chinese Social and Political Science Review 11 : 1 - 15 says that the Chinese are not traditionally adventurers or given to travel. Upheaval and economic pressures have been the cause of emigration for many countries.
2. H. Gottwaldt in 1903 insists that "only scum of Chinese go abroad".
3. For general use to refer to any amah from the province of Kwangtung.

Women workers coming to Malaya to work as servants, when thrown into a strange setting where they must live their social life among themselves, they are likely to divide into units which express the solidarity of kinship ties. The village and the dialect area provided them with lines along which to organize themselves. Under these circumstances, a number of 'public houses' ('kung as uk' or 'kung as fong' and 'tau wai uk') which can be termed as 'voluntary associations' based on their kin and the nature of their membership.

3.1 'Kung as uk' (shared / public house) and 'Kung as fong' (shared / public room)

In normal usage by the amahs, the two term is synonymous. In Southern

3. AMAHs' 'PUBLIC HOUSES IN PENANG'.

It is often said of the Chinese that they can do without any form of institutional help since their family system itself affords the most efficient kind of social insurance that one could have. The ideal situation whereby people are helped by relatives, brothers and children, however, can only be obtained properly when members of a joint family are locally based i.e. they live near enough to one another or can easily get in touch with one another. Financial aid can be rendered by people living great distances from each other, as is evidenced by the frequency with which sums of money were sent back to China by immigrants living in Malaya. However, it is only in the large joint family, consisting of husband, wife and their married sons and wives, and unmarried daughters all living in one house that there is the real security of always having a home to go back to.

Women workers coming to Malaya to work as servants, when thrown into a strange setting where they must live their social life among themselves, they are likely to divide into units which express the solidarity of homeland ties. The village and the dialect area provided them with lines along which to organize themselves. Under these circumstances, a number of 'public houses' ('kung sz uk' or 'kung sz fong' and 'tsz moo uk') which can be termed as 'voluntary associations' based on their aim and the nature of their membership.

3.1 'Kung sz uk' (shared / public house) and 'Kung sz fong' (shared / public room)

In normal usage by the amahs, the two term is synonymous. In Southern

China and the central China, 'uk' means a house but in Northern China it means a room. 'Fong' means a house, a room or a building. Hence, 'kung sz uk' means a 'public house', whereas 'kung sz fong' mean a 'public room' and 'kung sz' means 'public company'.

As used by the Chinese community in Malaya, and in Penang in particular, 'kung sz' may refer to :-

- (i) any group of any size banded together for any purpose : political, sosial or economic, or any sub-groups of these,
- (ii) the officers who are at the head of such a group and
- (iii) more specifically certain political groups or sub-groups of these and their officers.

The amahs 'kung sz uk' that are found today are mainly for economic purposes and to some extent for social purposes as well.

Amahs 'kung sz uk' or 'kung sz fong' may be defined as a dwelling place to which the amah return when they become unemployed and in which they keep their personal belongings during the period of employment, and to which communication can be directed, since most of these amahs do not know all the members of the same 'kung sz uk' nor their places of employment as the frequency and regularity of visits to the 'kung sz uk' varies for each individual. To those amahs whose employers do not provide them with sleeping accommodation, it is a place of abode. All in all it provides a cheap accommodation compared to other form of lodging home available. Whether or not it is used for any social function will depend on the size of the 'kung sz uk' or 'kung sz fong'. As most of the 'kung sz uk' or 'kung sz fong' are

situated deep in Chinatown,¹ it minimises the inconveniences of getting around even for the elderly amahs, as assortment of shops, markets and the Temple of Goddess of Mercy is just a stone throw away. They are usually old houses - built during the colonial days which usually has two sitting halls and are double-storey terrace. Furthermore, they are usually owned by Chinese businessmen who have in the past been committee members of their various clan associations. Usually the tenants of the 'kung sz uk' and the landlord came from the same village in China. Renting out the house on the landlord's part is more an act of generosity and sympathy towards the amahs predicament than a mean of making a profit. Several of these houses are also owned not by individual but by a benevolent society in Penang called the Lam Wah Ee Association which is one of the most popular association of its kind among the Cantonese especially the domestic amahs.

The controlling rights in the 'kung sz uk' usually belongs to the amah who first proposed the setting up of the house. She determines the number of occupants and the occupancy rates of the rooms. The amah is actually the chief tenant or 'kung sz uk' keeper. However, the monthly contributions of members or tenants towards the running costs and rent vary according to the number of women joining and the size and facilities of the 'kung sz uk'. Rents are collected on a daily or monthly basis by this chief tenant. Twenty or so years ago, an amah is charged only forty cents a night with water, electricity and cooking facilities thrown in or four dollars a month. Now the rent is two dollars a night with the same facilities provided. Nevertheless, the rent is still 'very cheap' compared to today's cost of living.

Plate 5 : A typical 'kung sz uk'



Usually the occupants are from the same village in China and, thus, speak the same dialect and practice the same customs. This facilitates communication among tenants. If there exists a variety of dialects in one 'kung sz uk', a communication gap would sprout causing misunderstandings and intolerance among tenants. This situation may even be projected further to cause life to be unberable in this particular 'kung sz uk'. Hence, the determining factor in selection of tenants is the dialect spoken by and the village from which the chief tenant originated. This regulation is not strictly adhered to in the past 15 years or so. The writer was told by some old amahs that they had stayed in 'kung sz uk' where the chief tenant and existing tenants speak a dialect different from theirs. There are also local people who are tenants in these houses. This may be due to the ban on immigration imposed by the Malayan government in 1938, and since most of the amahs who came during the 1930s have either gone back to China for good or had passed away. These 'kung sz uk' keepers have no choice but to take in locals if they want to have sufficient fund to pay rent. Nevertheless, they are still choosy as to whom they take in. Normally it is local women who are in the same profession and for one reason or another do not wish to stay with their existing families.

The tenancy of the 'kung sz uk' is being handed down through specific person asked by the deceased keeper to take over the tenancy; or passed to the deceased keeper's relatives or sworn sisters or even one of the sisters. It is always in that order of preference. So confusion does not exist as there are always someone the deceased keeper had chosen to take over the tenancy. However, amahs are not keen to run a 'kung sz uk' especially a

Table 7 : Staying in 'kung sz uk' of a different dialect group.

	Number	%
Amahs who had stayed in 'kung sz uk' of different dialect group	5	10.9
Amahs who had not stayed in 'kung sz uk' of different dialect group	41	89.1
Total	46	100.0

large one because of the difficulty of collecting the rents and because it is not really a profitable undertaking. If a young amah or an amah who is already in employment is given the tenancy, it often happen that this fortunate amah would pass the tenancy to another amah, usually an elderly amah who is too frail to work.

The number of tenants in the 'kung sz uk' range from over fourty to less than a hundred amahs in the days when the influx of women immigrants were high. Today this figure has dwindled. Reasons for the decline in number are the same as those causing the 'kung sz uk' keepers to take in local women. Number of rooms available in these 'kung sz uk' are between five to eight rooms. Rooms are actually a small cubicle measuring about eight feet by eight feet with one window for ventilation. However there are no problem with sleeping spaces, since all the tenants are not in at one and the same time. Those who are still employed sleep in at most once a week on their day off. Anyway, the rooms have a raised platform and this solve the problem of limited sleeping space in a room. If beds were used in each room, only about four or five persons can sleep in one room, that is if double-decker beds were used. However, a room without beds provide more moving space enabling seven to eight persons to sleep in one room because then, a sleeping space is where one place her head on the wooden platform. Some 'kung sz uk' even have wooden makeshift beds along the hallways. If and when the atmosphere become too tense due to misunderstandings that may strained the relationship between two members of the same room or house, both tenants or one of them can just move out to another 'kung sz uk'. But now when most of these amahs are unemployed and quite old (the youngest may be in their late

Plate 6 : A group of amahs (all members) of a 'kung sz uk'. Picture taken in front of a hotel before the Second World War.



Plate 7 : The exterior of a room in the 'kung sz uk' which is similar to the rooms in the 'tsz mooi uk'.



Plate 8 : The interior of such a room.



Plate 9 : Wooden makeshift beds along the hallway or corridor in the 'kung sz uk' and the 'tsz mooi uk'.



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60s), finding an alternative accommodation mainly in the 'kung sz uk' may prove to be a problem as most of the 'kung sz uk' keepers' fear the ill health, high dying rate and difficulties in collecting rents from these amahs. The excuse usually given (for courtesy sake) is that if they should fall sick which is quite likely taking into account their advanced age, it would necessitate one of their members who may need some caring herself, to look after them.

Each amah cooks her own meals, do her own shopping and laundry. She even prayed by herself, worship any God or spirit she believes in. Although the chief tenant amah has a place to which a certain God or spirit is dedicated but this God is not necessarily to be worshipped by all the amahs of that 'kung sz uk'.

In cases of minor illness, a member amah normally returns to her 'kung sz uk' for rest. If the illness gets serious, she would be asked by the chief tenant to seek admission into a hospital whether government or private, or go to a rest house - 'fuk shau shoh' (福寿所) which literally means a place of blessing and longevity. It is commonly known as the 'death house'. These houses are usually run by some particular clan associations with the aim of serving the needs and providing such social services to their fellow clansmen from the same village in China. Hence, it is a non-profitable organization. Workers are hired by the clan association at a minimal pay / allowance. Usually these workers are people who need a place for lodging, hence the low pay does not necessarily seem unattractive as the deal is co-beneficial. Moreover, they do make some extra income from services

Plate 10: Larders or cupboards and cooking pots and stoves belonging to each individual amah.



rendered to their clients.

These houses combined functions connected with death and the paraphernalia of departure from the world. They also arrange for the services of geomancers, Taoist and Buddhist priests, professional wailers,² paper money scatterers, brass bands and latterns. However, one or more rooms may be set aside as a lying-up place for the mortally sick. In addition there may also be a mortuary and a small room for housing the temporary spirit tablets. An ill person can be admitted to a 'death house' on payment of a fee. No food or medical attention is provided, but attendance is provided and charged to a patient.

Chief tenant of a 'kung sz uk' will not allow any death to take place in the 'kung sz uk' as far as she can possibly prevent it. It is considered a dreadful thing to have a death take place in the 'kung sz uk' premises and all dying persons were kept away from it. If an amah died she is taken immediately to a 'death house', in this case a 'taai naan koon' (大難館 - house of big difficulties) where arrangements for the funeral would then be made. In this 'death house', the top floor is used to house the sick and the ground floor is the dead. Chinese believe that it is bad for the dead to 'go over' or be above the living. Any relative can send a dead to a 'death house' on payment of a fee. A place is then allocated to the dead while preparation is being made for the funeral.

Like the 'fuk shau shoh' the 'taai naan koon' is also run by a clan association as a non-profitable organization.

Plate 11 : A 'fuk shau shoh' / 'taai naan koon' - death house. This is the Toi Shan Convalescent Home in Hutton Lane, Penang.



Amahs who stay in the 'kung sz uk' have to pay for everything they need. Their livelihood during their unemployment period (due to incapacitation or too frail to work) depend on their lifetime savings. If and when the savings finishes or depletes and they are incapable of paying their rent and feed themselves, they would be asked by the chief tenant to leave. The only alternative these amahs have is the Homes for the destitute poor, which ever one that may accept them.

In the pre-war days, the term 'coolie uk' or 'coolie fong' is quite commonly used when referring to a 'kung sz uk'. But there exist differences between the two : 'kung sz uk' does not give an indication as to a social class, while 'coolie uk' refers to the coolie class or manual labour. The term 'coolie' has now been abolished from the daily usage to refer to labourers. 'Kung yan fong' (workers' rooms) is also use synonymously with 'kung sz fong'.

3.2 'Tsz mooi uk' (Sisters House)

'Tsz mooi uk' like 'kung sz uk' also refers to the amahs association or 'public house', except the former consists of a small group of tenants or members. However, its aim is the same as 'kung sz uk'. These 'tsz mooi uk' are located in the heart of Chinatown too. Their rooms are cubicles just like those in the 'kung sz uk'. The general discriptions of these 'tsz mooi uk' are exactly the same as the 'kung sz uk' except for a few specific features.

The number of members staying in the 'tsz mooi uk' is normally from



fifteen to less than forty. These members are referred to as 'sisters' because they belonged to a sworn sisterhood or friendship whereby a vow may have been taken or by mutual understanding to treat each other as natural sisters would, which includes assisting fellow members who are in difficulty and to feel like a member of the family.

These sisters before being members in this house has to buy a share in the place. A share is usually about a thousand to three thousand dollars depending on the value of the house and the number of shareholders. The collected sum are used to buy or 'purchase under contract',³ a particular house. Every sister is usually a 'legal'⁴ owner of the house. She does not have to pay a single cent of rent from hereafter except a small amount each month for the electricity and water bills and annually for quit rent and also occasionally when the house needs repairing, not forgetting her daily expenses on food and other necessities. However, most of the 'tsz mooi uk' has some side-incomes. These may come in the form of taxes from mahjong sessions and rents collected from rooms or space rented out. These side-incomes made up the 'common pool'.

On the day of moving in to stay in the 'tsz mooi uk', all sisters will have to be present and joss-sticks are lighted to whatever God or Goddess being worship to pray for peace and harmony in living together in the same house. A feast may be given pending on the availability of funds, to friends and relatives. Guests are required to bring along gifts in whatever form, for the house-owners. This occasion is referred to as 'yaap for' (house-warming).

Plate 13 : A group of amahs (all members) of a 'tsz-mooi uk'. Picture taken in front of the house on the 'house-warming' day.



Each 'tsz mooi uk' has one sister who exercises varying degrees of authority over the others. She usually holds this position by virtue of seniority in years or experience as a domestic servant, or by her initial role in organizing the 'tsz mooi uk'. This woman will often take an active interest in the welfare and conditions of employment of her fellow sisters. In the past, when a member goes for an interview for a new job, the head



of the 'tsz mooi uk' are something like a trade guild in their facilities and objectives. However, no inter-organization has developed whereby members of different 'tsz mooi uk' might meet to fix regulations for conditions generally for domestic service.

Sisters in the 'tsz mooi uk' normally worship the same God and Goddess. Purchases of praying articles such as joss-sticks, joss-papers, oil for the lamps, fruits etc., come from the 'common pool'. One or two maids who are employed and staying full-time in the house are allocated duties of worshipping

Each 'tsz mooi uk' has one sister who exercises varying degrees of authority over the others. She usually holds this position by virtue of seniority in years or experience as a domestic servant, or by her initial role in organizing the 'tsz mooi uk'. This woman will often take an active interest in the welfare and conditions of employment of her fellow sisters. In the past, when a member goes for an interview for a new job, the head amah will sometimes accompany her and see that the term of service reached are appropriate. Sisters of a 'tsz mooi uk' also take an interest in maintaining standards of efficiency in employment. A young woman of insufficient experience for instance, may not be permitted by her sisters in the 'tsz mooi uk' to be a cook - general amah until she has worked some years in a subordinate capacity. The work the sisters may do for a particular kind of job is decided by the head amah or agreed upon after discussions among the sisters. Thus, a cook - general may not be allowed to wash men's trousers, mosquito nets and furniture coverings. Sisters too have an understanding that no sister belonging to a 'tsz mooi uk' may take a job in a household from which a fellow sister has been dismissed. In the past, some of the 'tsz mooi uk' are something like a trade guild in their facilities and objectives. However, no inter-organization has developed whereby members of different 'tsz mooi uk' might meet to fix regulations for conditions generally for domestic service.

Sisters in the 'tsz mooi uk' normally worship the same God and Goddess. Purchases of praying articles such as joss-sticks, joss-papers, oil for the lamps, fruits etc., come from the 'common pool'. One or two amahs who are employed and staying full-time in the house are allocated duties of worshipping

the God and Goddess. Normally the duties are taken up on a voluntary basis. 'tsz mooí uk' usually worships either Koon Yam (Goddess of Mercy) or Kuan Ti Yeh (God of War) or both. The worship of Koon Yam, is related to a Chinese legend about a princess, the third daughter of King F'o Kiah who ascended the throne of China in 2587 B.C. (PURCELL : 1967 : pp 120). This princess successfully repelled all efforts on her father's part to get her married off and became a Buddhist nun in spite of great opposition from her family (Dore : 1920 : pp 134 - 196). Koon Yam is said to be a symbol of purity, chastity, mercy and spinsterhood. One poem of Koon Yam emphasizing the attractiveness of life she chose has been translated by Mrs E.T.C. Williams (JCERAS : Vol. 33 : pp 28) as follows:

..... Look back on the way I have travelled

And judge if a better be found

No husband to claim my devotions

No mother-in-law to control,

No children to follow my foot-steps

And fetter the wings of the soul.

As free as the wind in the mountain

Or the birds that soar up to the sun,

From morning till evening I wander

In the sombre hued robes of a nun.

Kuan Ti Yeh (God of War) is a symbol of everlasting friendship, brotherhood or in this case, sisterhood and the keeper of peace in a home. Originally he was said to have risen to fame in 170 A.D. when he and three other

military leaders took an oath to live and die together fighting the Yellow Turban Rebels, fanatics who brought about the overthrow of the Han dynasty. He is one of the most feared and respected by all the gods, but the Chinese worship him not because they love war; on the contrary is because he can prevent misunderstanding in their homes and save the households from its consequences (PEPLOW : 1931 : pp 130). Why the God and Goddess are worshipped, in the 'tsz mooi uk' has to remain a mystery as the amahs interviewed could not give a satisfactory explanation.

When a sister falls ill and return to the 'tsz mooi uk', she might be helped in some small way, for instance she is helped to boil the medicine if she is too weak to do so. Chinese medicine consists of dried herbs which requires to be boiled with water to extract the medicinal value. The extend of help depends on the depth of friendship between herself and the sister giving her the help. When a sister is seriously ill and really has no money, other sisters contribute or donate some money towards buying her medicines. When a sister die without any money at all and had no death benefit, each of the sister also contribute a little towards the funeral expenses. But this show of generosity or co-operativeness is waning due to the increase in the number of sisters becoming too frail to work, hence are forced to retire and therefore have little money.

The dead sister's body can be placed in the main hall right in front of the main door while arrangements for the funeral are being made by the other sisters. To the amahs the appropriate funeral arrangements are very important if she wants to atone her sins and to reincarnate into a better life in her

next birth. Hence, most if not all the amahs participate in death benefit schemes provided by individual 'wui kun' (clan or district associations). When a person dies, the superstitious assumption is that he or she is straight away transported to hell or hades (tei yuk). Into a hellish incarceration, a man or woman goes whether he or she had been a saint or a sinner, rich or poor in life. Yet all hope for his or her salvation is not yet past. Something can be done for her. That something is a 'ta-chai' (打齋 - paying of respects) which is an elaborate ceremony. A small army of priests and nuns are hired to invade Hell (phor tei yuk), 'rescue' (ta kow) the dead man and 'lead' him across the bridge which forms the link with Heaven (kor tin khew).

Chinese believe completely in the world beyond, peopled by spirit with human feelings. The spirits eat and drink, wear apparel, and enjoy the amenities and luxuries of life, like the humans they once were. It is up to the living to provide for their beloved departed. Simple paper replicas of a person's worldly needs are made and sent along through the holy fire. That is why mourners burn stacks and stacks of hades currency at funerals and at the subsequent ceremonies to provide the dead with plenty of 'money' to spend in the underworld. For three full weeks after a Chinese dies, she or he is also served with her or his favourite dishes at regular meal times. These are placed before his or her household shrine for the dead must not be allowed to travel hungry on the long and tedious journey to Hell. On the same arduous journey the dead must also not only be guarded against the cold but be ready to appear before the King of Hades in their sumptuous best. Thus, a corpse before being put into a coffin, is dressed in either five or

Plate 15 : A 'ta-chai' (paying of respect) ceremony in one of the 'tsz mooi uk'.



Plate 16 : An altar in a 'tsz mooi uk'. The household God takes the centre position while the ancestors' tablet is place on the left side.



Plate 17 : The ancestors' (all the departed sisters or members) tablet.



seven suits,⁵ one upon the other.

Before the corpse is dressed, it has to be washed. This gives rise to the 'maai soi' (buying water) ceremony - the very first when the Chinese's death occurs. By tradition, the water used for cleansing the dead cannot be taken from inside a house. It must be 'bought' from Hoi Loong Wong - the Monarch of the Oceans. Since it is impractical to go to the ocean, water is drawn from the tap. Only a basinful is required and two copper coins are thrown onto the ground or water tub as the case may be, to denote the purchase. The 'water 'buying' is done by the eldest son or nearest relative but in this case usually her sworn sister or sisters or her closest friend, of the dead person, heading a procession of relatives, in this case, the other sisters. An accompanying priest mutters the necessary incantations. The washing is only a gesture. The priest dips a towel into the water and lightly wipes the dead person's face thrice, chanting : "You are now raised as fairy of the celestial heavens" (seng sin, seng sin).

From the time the person dies to the day when the body is taken for burial or cremation, all the sisters in the 'tsz mooi uk' dress in black (for sworn sisters) or other solemn colours (for the other sisters) as a sign of mourning or bereavement. A record of the day of death is kept so that during the death anniversary, the dead is worshipped. The dead are also worshipped during 'cheng meng' (all souls' day). For those who can still move around with ease, they visit the graves of their fellow sisters to sweep and clean the place. Otherwise, they just pray at home. An amah prior to her death, may request to have her spirit tablet put in 'wui kun' (clan /

district association), that is if one has money. A place for the spirit tablet in the 'wai' room cost several hundred dollars.

Plate 18 : A record of the date of death of all the members / sisters of a 'tsz mooi uk'.



district association), that is if she has money. A place for the spirit tablet in the 'wui kun' cost several hundred dollars.

Now with the prices of everything going up including funeral rites, a simple funeral is arranged for a sister if her remaining money is not enough for an elaborate ceremony. Nevertheless, when a number of sisters have passed away, leaving enough to form a 'common pool', an elaborate ceremony or 'ta-chai' will be held for all the departed sisters. This may take a period of several years, maybe three to five years.

In the past, sisters who were going back to China for good, or those who need the money to support themselves can sell their share to other amahs belonging to the same dialect group who want to be members of a particular 'tsz mooi uk'. These buyers must of course be someone known to the other sisters. A departed sister may also bequeath her share to a selected person before dying. But today, 'tsz mooi uk' purchased under contract can no longer sell their share to the others except those already staying in the house. Hence now, some of the 'tsz mooi uk' with more than enough space for their use, usually rent out the front portion of their house to small business and or rent out their available rooms to locals or amahs themselves. This income from rent together with tax / commission from mahjong sessions are used for paying all common expenses incurred by the sisters, extras being divided up among the sisters. This extra money in the past used to be invested in tontine, pawnshops or sundry shops for interest, as when most of the sisters were still in employment, and the need for extra money did not arise. Now, when most of the sisters are not in employment the need

for extra money arises. Moreover as one amah puts it, "it (the remaining money after expenses have been deducted) is only 'chicken feeds' now that the cost of everything is so high. What and how such possible interest or returns can we hope to get." Today due to the low rental charges - a room only cost fourty to sixty dollars a month, and the number of sisters retired or unemployed are high, the extra money is divided among the sisters for their personal use. Extra money from the 'common pool' is only distributed once every six months or a year pending on the expenses incurred. Each sister may only get less than thirty dollars sometimes. The writer was told that sometimes for a year or two, no extra money were received.

Almost all the 'kung sz uk' and 'tsz mooi uk' bore a name which reflects 'living together' or 'living in harmony'. Two examples of such names are 'loein koay' (联居 - living together in co-operation) and 'seng koay' (诚居 - living together trouble-free). The amahs' associations or 'public houses' usually keep in contact with each other based on their common dialect, district or even proximity. Their relationship is more of a social nature and can be said to be quite distant. The writer was told that the clan associations' do not provide them with any form of assistance, financial or otherwise.

The advantages of joining an amahs' association or 'public house' can be summarized as :

- (1) The amah is assured of a place to which she can return during the unemployment periods or in the case of those in employment, a place in which to sleep if no sleeping accommodation is provided by her employer.

- (2) A permanent base in the absence of a family home where she is assured of a permanent address to which communication can be directed, and also she can leave all her belongings here wherever she may be working.
- (3) In cases of sudden death, the sisters will attend to the necessary funeral arrangements.
- (4) For security : they feel safe among persons of their own kind. The association also acts as some sort of a labour exchange where work opportunities can be found.
- (5) Cheap housing.
- (6) A home to die in for the sisters in the 'tsz mooi' uk'.

NOTES

1. The area densely populated by Chinese shops, places of worship and residence.
2. It used to be a profession years back but now it is considered a dead profession. It arises from the belief that the King of Hades cannot stand the sight of tears, hence will sympathize with the mourners and lessen the dead person's punishment.
3. The house title is still under the house owner's name but the tenants can stay for as long as they live.
4. Used here to mean a 'rightful' owner.
5. Chinese used odd numbers to indicate femininity.

Their spinsterhood could have been further enhanced by the Buddhist belief that single women could enter the Pure Land. The Lotus Gospel says that (Mrs. E. F. C. Williams : JOURNALS Vol. 33)

Any female who shall hear and penetrate this chapter

4. SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF THE AMAHS

In the pre-war days, amahs trundling babies in prams for evening airings in public parks, was a common sight. Amahs were then, in high demand as domestic help because of their unquestioned loyalty and capacity for hard work. It was a common practice in affluent households to employ as many baby-minders as there children. Each child has his or her own amah to see to every need. Though the amahs always knew and kept her place, many are the tales told of how they ruled households with iron hands. They cared for their charges as if they were their own children. It was a total twenty-four hours caring. These amahs had to be booked before-hand or before time as they were in great demand then. They could quit working for any family anytime they wish.

They choose a way of life as domestic servants because it offered a certain security - free lodging and three meals in addition to a salary and in exchange unswerving loyalty and patient toll. They left China as young girls in search of greener pastures. Having no family ties, they were ideal as domestic servants. Since their work as domestic servants requires residence in an employer's home, it would be an encumbrance if they had husbands trailing after them. Perhaps this is why many of them never once contemplate marrying when they are in Malaya even though marriage life is not that harsh or frightful as compared to China. Their persistence in keeping their spinsterhood could have been further enhanced by the Buddhist belief that single women could enter the Pure Land. The Lotus Gospel says that (Mrs. E.T.C Williams : JCBRAS Vol. 33)

Any female who shall hear and penetrate this chapter

will, after disappearing from earth, be burn in the world.....

where the Lord Amitayus.....dwells.....There no women are to

be found : there sexual intercourse is absolutely unknown.

These amahs were known and appreciated for their dedication, trustworthiness and allegiances. They spent the greater part of their lives taking care of the families that employed them. In the pre-war days, the amahs were usually employed by both the Chinese¹ and European government officers but more frequently they were employed by the rich Chinese businessmen and popular high-class prostitutes. Amahs seeking work with Western households used primarily the Labour Department of the Government which acted as an employment agency. On the other hand, many Chinese families get their servant either by going directly to the 'kung sz uk' or 'tsz mooi uk' of which they had knowledge of or by introduction from one servant to a fellow member of her 'kung sz uk' or 'tsz mooi uk'.

The amahs' attire consist of a black and white samfoo (white tunic and black trousers). Their attire is however a source of mystique. It is popularly said that white tops symbolize purity and black pants for subordinate position. But many amahs interviewed do not agree with this interpretations. As one of them explained, "I think it started during the colonial days. These Europeans like people to wear white as it is associated with neatness and cleanliness. So most amahs wear white tops over their own black pants. In time it became a kind of standard wear for those in household service. Moreover, baby-minders dressed in black top will soon have white powder from their charges' body on their top. Also babies fear

dark colours." However, amahs never wear bright colours. Red coloured clothes and use of facial make-up are completely a taboo, although the reasons for these are not explained to the writer. But retired or unemployed amahs wear a solemn coloured top with or without small flowery design over their black pants when in their 'kung sz uk' or 'tsz mooi uk'. In the past, they were spotted either with their hair coiled up in a bun or tied in a plait but due to difficulties in washing and plaiting or making their hair into a coiffure now that these retired amahs are old and frail, most of them are now sporting short straight hair.

In the pre-war days, the amahs' wages ranged from three dollars to ten dollars a month, depending on whether the employers were Chinese or Europeans. European employers paid more compared to their Chinese counterparts. However, three dollars a month was a gold mine then, for food was cheap. One gantang of rice cost only eighteen cents while a roast duck only cost twenty cents and a ton of sugar was a dollar fifty. Employers provided everything from clogs to toothpaste and clothes - two suits a year. Sometimes even cigarettes too. There were also no limitation to the amount of choice of food an amah consumes. Most amahs preferred to work for Europeans then, because they were not required to work after five and during tea time. Some even said that the European "maams" were polite about everything - when requiring attention of the amah.

Presently the amahs are paid around two hundred dollars to four hundred dollars a month. But many complained about the restrictions imposed on them : some employers especially Chinese tell the amahs not to eat this or

Plate 19 : Most amahs today are no longer wearing a coiffure but short straight hair instead.



touch that. They may also be expected to buy their own toiletries. These differences may be accounted to the high cost of living today. There is also an increase in supply of domestic help since even local women, sometimes young girls rendered their services in this field. There are even employment agencies that deal specifically with domestic helps. It is something that did not exist in the past. In the pre-war days due to the high demands for domestic servants, the 'kung sz uk' and 'tsz mooi uk' set a minimum wage rate. An amah who works below the rate set, if found out by fellow colleagues would be ridiculed or referred to with sarcasm. Today, this practice is abolished as there exist competition in the market. Wages are now determined by the amount and types of work entailed.

Apart from their wages, amahs occasionally get extra incomes from 'hung pau'² on Chinese New Year from their employers and those who run tontine group receives commission. For those amahs who are staying at the 'tsz mooi uk' once in awhile receive dividend from the 'common pool' as alluded to earlier, after all expenses have been deducted.

When an amah is still in employment, she has a mean of saving up for the 'rainy days'. Savings may be in the form of lending it to the goldsmiths' shops, sundry shops and pawnshops for a small interest of subscription towards 'shin hau ooi' (death benefit associations), 'lo yan ooi' (old people associations) and 'ngan ooi' (tontines). Most of these amahs do not make use of the Post Office Saving Bank or commercial banks because of requirements such as having to fill forms which most of them cannot do because they are illiterate or had only received only little formal education.

They prefer to keep cash or gold ornaments (which can be pawned, sold or melted in times of needs).

'Shin hau ooi' and 'lo yan ooi' can be used synonymously to mean Death Benefit Associations. This is because the Chinese do not like to use the term 'shin hau' (death) because of some superstitious notions, hence, the term 'lo yan' (old people) is used in its place. Most of these death benefit associations mainly those managed by a few women or a religious organization have a membership limited to Chinese women and the small scale ones are limited to people coming from the same village in China. They arrange funerals, supply the nuns or priests to take part in the various funeral ceremonies, people to mourn (the other subscribers), and at times a plot of burial ground as well. The monthly subscription is three dollars. A death benefit of five hundred dollars will be paid to the deceased member's beneficiary / beneficiaries if she has been paying in for a period of a few years usually for a minimum of four years.

Death Benefit Associations are extremely popular among the Cantonese amahs. Almost every one of them subscribed to these associations : This may be due to their belief in the enormous importance of proper funeral arrangements that will guarantee them a better life in reincarnation. Chinese have a saying to this effect : "Never mind how you live, get buried well".

Tontine is a term used to describe a distinctive pattern of friendly society which is usually small in scale. It is called 'ui ooi' (shaking associations) by the Cantonese, or with a slight variation in method of organization, 'tei poh ooi' (spread on the ground association). The term

tontine is said to derive from the name of a Venetian man of the seventeenth century - Lorenzo Tonti, who started clubs for raising money for funeral in his hometown. Tontines are organized by individuals who wish to raise money quickly for a number of different purposes. Such associations may involve "banks" to up to several thousands of dollars at a time. Since they involve 'on the spot' payments and do not necessitate any elaborate banking arrangements, they were extremely popular among the amahs. But it is gradually falling into disfavour among these amahs as many had experienced members of the group absconding with the money collected. However tontine are still run by some profit-seeking individuals and are a popular means of earning a little extra income for the retired elderly amah.

The commonest variation is when the method of deciding who shall receive the money is decided by lot. The organisation of the tontine is briefly as follows (KULP : 1926 : pp. 189 - 196 and BALL : 1903 : pp. 632 - 644) :-

Suppose A requires \$100.00. She invites a number of friends and colleagues to join together - 'maai ooi' and become members or shareholders of a tontine. The names of the members and dates on which payments are to be made are entered into a book. Usually each member has a pass book and payments are made once or twice a month.

In the simplest form, the first ten payments all go to A who has priority as organiser. The next time B collects \$100.00 and so on in order of precedence decided upon in advance or at each payment date. Precedence is usually decided by throwing the 'pue' (a divining blocks). These are two kidney shaped blocks of bamboo root or wood, which are flat on one side and

rounded at the other. If when they are thrown on the ground, both fall with their flat side in the same direction, up or down, the answer is negative. A positive answer requires one to fall with flat side uppermost and the other with the rounded side. However when a negative answer is obtained, the individual is entitled to another throw. If on both throws the answer is negative then it must be accepted as final. The person obtaining three positive answers is first, three straight answers being preferred. If nobody gets three positives, the one with the next highest number of positives is selected. In a simple tontine then, each member in turn gets \$100.00 and pays out in instalments of \$10.00, a total of \$100.00.

The commonest variation is when the method of deciding who shall receive the loans at each payment period is by tender. Here A as before gets a full \$100.00 the first month. But the next time the rest of the members bid for the bank by offering different rates of interest. Suppose B wins by offering 50 cents. The members C - K pay now \$9.50 each. A pays a full \$10.00 and B therefore, gets \$10.00 plus $\$9.50 \times 8$ equals \$95.50. The next time if say C wins by offering 25 cents, A and B, since they already had the bank cannot bid and must continue to pay \$10.00 in full each time until everybody has had the bank, those who have not had it yet then pays C \$9.75 each. When K's turn comes, he gets a full \$100.00 since all members have had the bank and are paying \$10.00 in full each time. K does not have to bid but his full payment is compensation for his waiting until last to use the money.

Frequently A as the organiser is not actually a member of the tontine and does not lend or borrow. She does all the organising : the filling of

pass-books, the collecting of the interest bids and informing the results. This is the form which is known as the 'tei poh ooi'. In return for services rendered, A get a part, usually half of one share paid to her by the successful drawer of the bank.

Sometimes some amahs' 'public houses' run tontine with another objective that is to save money for some festivals. Each festival club has its own head who may or may not be the head woman of the 'public house'. The more popular festival clubs for the 'public house' to organise are "ts'at tse taan ooi" (club for the Festival of the seven sisters), this festival takes place on the seventh day of the seventh moon, and the other is the middle of the three Koon Yam festivals which falls on the nineteenth of the sixth moon.

The seven sisters festival is generally considered to be a Cantonese unmarried women's festival as the legend is connected to the spinning and weaving industries of the Shun-te districts in Kwangtung. On the evening of the festival, entertainment which includes a special dinner is held. All members try to return from their job for this event.

In the pre-war days, the passage from China to Malaya was only thirty-two dollars. Some of the amahs either came with relatives or sisters from the same village but most came with 'shui haak'. The term 'shui haak' means 'a sailor, a man sent to buy up goods'. He acts as a guide to newcomers to Malaya from China and sometimes will pay for their charges' passages first. As a guide also to emigrants returning to their respective villages in China, he advises the amahs as to what articles they can take back to China, advises

Table 8 : Manner of arrival.

Came to Malaya with :	Number	%
'shui haak'	31	67.4
relatives	6	13.0
village sisters(friends)	9	19.6
Total	46	100.0

Most emigrants in employment, usually correspond with families or relatives back home. Two or three letters are received or written in a year. Letters from China are usually filled with news of the financial difficulties, hence, an emigrant always send money along with almost every reply. The amount sent back depended on the urgency of the matter or situation. At times when some celebration are to take place like marriages of brothers, sisters or relatives, the amount may be more. Married emigrants are more regular at sending money home. Due to the emigrants' low educational ability, letters are usually written by 'letter-writers' who usually stationed themselves along the river boat way in Chinatown. The cost of writing a letter was about thirty

in the preparation for their journey, takes them through different departments in getting their travelling documents, buying their passage tickets and if required helps them by lending them money. In short, he is the amahs teacher, advisor, guide, messenger and sometimes financier. He visits the amahs families and relatives in China and bring them news from Malaya, and vice-versa. For his services a gift either in cash or in kind is given to him. He also brings presents from the amahs to their respective family and or relatives and is paid some money for his trouble. All his services to the amahs are paid some fees or commission. These 'shui haak' normally brings the newcomers to the 'public houses' for lodging. He usually has a connection with one or more 'public houses' in every town he used to embark. On each landing he visits the 'public houses' for business. He is a mean of maintaining ties with the relatives in China. Chinese emigrants believe in words of mouth more than in letters since most of their letters are written by a third person.

Most amahs when in employment, usually correspond with families or relatives back home. Two or three letters are received or written in a year. Letters from China are usually filled with news of the financial difficulties, hence, an amahs always send money along with almost every reply. The amount sent back depended on the urgency of the matter or situation. At times when some celebration are to take place like marriages of brothers, sisters or relatives, the amount may be more. Married amahs are more regular at sending money home. Due to the amahs' low educational ability, letters are usually written by 'letter-writers' who usually stationed themselves along the five foot way in Chinatown. The cost of writing a letter was twenty to thirty

cents in the pre-war days but now it cost around a dollar fifty to two dollars. Unemployed amahs find that two dollars is quite expensive, hence for them correspondence with China is lessen. Also they are now unable to send remittances back because they have their own future to take care of. In the past, presents in the form of material such as cloth, medicated oil, ointments etc. were sent through 'shui haak', sisters from the same village in China and close relatives to China. Money is given to these messengers who was going back "to buy eats on the road". It is actually a small sum for their services and trouble in sending each small bundle of things to the respective families. Today this practice had stopped because rarely do the amahs go back to China due to the financial strain of being unemployed. This practice is also further discouraged by the stringent immigration law regarding visits to China. Such trips take at least a few interviews by the immigration officers and a few months of waiting before approval is given. All in all it is a troublesome process.

These remittances maintain a more lasting tie between the remitters and their relatives in China. It exerts a stronger tie than mere letters. In the past remittances are usually sent through liscensed remittances shops which are usually goldsmith shops.

The rate of visiting China is higher among the married amahs than the unmarried amahs. These trips are taken either because the amahs themselves wanted to see their families and relatives after all these years but mostly because there are going to be celebrations in their respective family back home which needs their presence and their money. Unmarried amahs usually

stop taking such trips once their parents passed away. Each trip may take up almost all the savings of several long, hard years. Usually an amah come back to Malaya financially depleted and has to start all over again saving up her hard earned money before she decides on her next trip.

Savings is the main provision on which the amahs would rely for their subsistence when they become unemployed or were incapacitated by illness, or by old age, for any work. This savings is referred to as 'provision for the future' and not 'for old age' as these amahs have a dislike for this word - old age because it is superstitiously connected with death. Amahs do not voluntarily leave the employ of their employers with whom they were then working unless they were assured of getting another domestic job elsewhere and with a better wage. They tend to remain with the same employers for as long as the employers required their services, unless the employers' temperament was intolerable to them. But even then, they put up with it until they have found domestic work with another employer. They are careful not to unnecessarily delve their hands into their hard earned savings. If for any unforeseen circumstances they become unemployed and after a certain period still remained in the same situation, they would take up some sort of work to occupy themselves for the time being eg. sewing, making paper boxes, joss-sticks, joss-papers, and other light work, if their old bones permit. These activities are to earn a little pocket money. They are not prepared to spend quickly what they had saved up, if that could be avoided. Apart from cash savings, each amah owns some gold jewellery which is more for ornamental purposes than as savings. But in case of hardship, these gold jewellery can be melted for cash or be sold to pawnshops.

Working amahs occasionally give a small sum to their retired sworn sister / sisters or close friend / friends as pocket money.

It can be said that apart from their cash savings, the amahs had made no or little provisions for their future or old age. However, it is not possible to say as to what extent the amahs rely fully on their savings during their old age. Those amahs who are incapacitated by old age or ill health survive by trying to do some small or light tasks like running mahjong sessions, sew etc. Some are driven even to turn up to receive charities in the form of cash, rice, sugar and other basic necessities given by clan associations occasionally. However, the writer was told by the amahs interviewed that most of them do not like to register with the Welfare Department for monthly financial aid as in their own words, they are not totally incapacitated yet! Moreover, the process of finalizing the applications may take quite some time and even then the application may be rejected. Most amahs fear the embarrassment of being rejected.

Ironically in the majority of cases, their very passport to employment which is the absence of family ties is also their misfortune when old age overtake them. With neither much savings or kins, the amahs wait in their little cubicles for as long as they can put body and soul together. Blind, deaf or bedridden, they wait their time out.

NOTES

1. The term is used to include all those of Chinese descent, namely, the Chinese themselves and the Peranakan.
2. 'Hoi kung hung paau' - red packet with money inside, given on the first day after the Chinese New Year by the employers to their employees.

5. CONCLUSION

Presently in Penang, all the interviewed unattached Cantonese immigrant workers from the amahs' community who had retired for ten odd years had no wish to return to China. Their reasons for remaining in Malaysia were various but those most frequently given were that they no longer had kinsmen alive who they knew personally in their home villages; also that there had been many changes in China since they had migrated overseas and they felt they could "no longer belong" or adjust themselves to the new environment there. Hence, all of them had tried to save up enough money to buy a share in the 'tsz mooi uk' (sisters' house)¹ when they were still in employment. Unfortunately, some of their hopes were shattered due to the Japanese Occupation in Malaya (1941 - 1945). During this period, many 'public houses' were destroyed or dissolved voluntarily by the members and have not been re-established. It is alleged that in a few incidents, the caretakers of some 'public houses' made-off with the belongings placed in their charge during the confusion of Japanese Occupation.

When the Second World War ended, these affected amahs had to look for an alternative accommodation. Many of them ended up in the 'kung sz uk'. For those who managed to save up some money while they were still able to work, had a chance to purchase a share in a 'tsz mooi uk' when opportunities arise. But for others, they had no choice except to remain in these 'kung sz uk' for as long as they are permitted to stay. Most of these amahs hope deep down in their heart that Providence will be kind and they will be allowed to stay on with their fellow colleagues to the end of their days or at least have enough financial aid should their health fail them. This is

because many of the 'kung sz uk' make no satisfactory provision for the sick and aged members. Some of these houses do not allow their members to live in when seriously ill or at any rate discourage them from doing so on the grounds that it would necessitate one of their member staying there to look after them. Since members are not sworn sisters they have no obligation to assist each other in moments of needs. The kind of organisations provide a relatively narrow range of facilities only, namely temporarily accommodation. They are not particularly reliable as long-term method of social insurance.

Chronically ill amahs are asked to leave the 'kung sz uk' and seek admission into a hospital preferably one which gives free medical treatment. They cannot afford a fee paying hospital as all of them are retired; their savings must be spent carefully. However their stay in the hospital is not a long term solution to their problem. Beds in the hospital are limited due to the ever present demands, hence they would be asked to leave once their health improves or at times when their condition is incorrigible. In such cases, the amah leaves for the 'fuk shau shoh' (place of blessing and longevity) and wait for the approval of their application into the Home for the aged and destitute. However for those who have enough savings to see them through until the end of time, these 'fuk shau shoh' may be taken as their last permanent dwelling place. Part of the reason is : they might not be able to adjust to the regimented life in these Homes for the aged and destitute, also they may wish to receive visitors in their sick bed more often than a Home will allow. However there are a few reasons that may be used to explain their reluctance to seek refuge in the Homes for the aged and destitute.

In these Homes, old people from all kinds of races and dialect groups and districts can be found eventhough the amahs predominate among the inmates. Take for example the Silver Jubilee Home for the Aged; at the time of this study, it has 162 female inmates. Out of which 146 are Chinese women, 13 Indians and 3 Malays. Eventhough 80 percent of these Chinese female inmates are Cantonese speaking, but there exist differences in their manner of speaking and customs. Due to these differences, the slightest provocations or misunderstandings may spark off quarrels and at times, fights too. Some of the more patronising ones tend to intimidate the more submissive ones, it is the arena for the survival of the fittest. The reason for their quarrelsome nature can be explained in the words of Mr. Chong Peng Khoon, home manager for the Silver Jubilee Home for the Aged, "As most of these amahs are used to their cubicles lives of fending for oneself, they tend to treat others as enemies". But Mrs. Mary Kok, matron of the Penang Homes Association for the Infirm attribute their quarrelsome and intolerant natures to "sufferance from resentment from families and friends".

The writer came to know of a common fear among the amahs in the 'kung sz uk' and 'tsz mool uk' regarding their reluctance to join these Homes. As the amahs interviewed put it, "rumours have it that there exist mistreatments in these Homes when one is chronically ill and they do not receive careful attention which they are expected to. There is an incident whereby an attendant of one of these Homes stepped on an inmate's feet causing her to limp for two weeks, just because she asked to be helped out of the toilet when the attendant was busily engrossed in a conversation with a fellow attendant." However the writer having visited the Homes, spoke to

the person in charge and the inmates themselves, has reasons to believe that this common fear is the result of an isolated case blown out of proportion! This unfounded fear may be due to ignorance and misinformation on the amahs' part.

About 60 to 85 percent of the inmates in these three Homes were amahs with a large percentage belonging to the 'kung sz uk'. These amahs are usually in their late 60s to late 80s during admission into the Homes. All of them are now unemployed and financially disabled. Some of these inmates are sent to the Homes from the 'fuk shau shoh', and those who are chronically ill end-up in the Penang Home for the Infirm as it is the only Home in the state that takes in bedridden cases. Mrs. Kok complained that the women from the 'fuk shau shoh' are usually under-nourished and exceptionally dirty. It takes her almost three days to have them washed and cleaned when they are admitted into the Penang Home. This may be due to the fact that all services rendered to them during their stay in the 'fuk shau shoh' had to be paid for. Once the savings finished, the payment stopped, hence the services are terminated. It can be concluded that the amahs only seek admission into these Homes when they have no means to survive financially or are chronically ill and have no where else to go to.

Why then, we may asked, don't the amahs from the 'tsz mooi uk' who are living in a thrifty conditions want to go to the Homes for the Aged and Destitute where the board and lodging are provided free of charge? Amahs' mentality regarding death run in line with the beliefs in Confucianism among all Chinese. In Confucianism that is a saying that runs, "It is really

pitiable if one dies away from home. A man has to have friends and relatives they will mourn for you. A man who died without a proper funeral and mourners is like a dead dog " (Hsu : 1949 : pp 163). This does not mean that inmates in the Homes are not provided with a decent burial but it is a simple one compared to the one arranged by the 'sisters'. Most amahs prefer a showy funeral and post-mortuary rites due to their belief in the existence of a world after death. Even with the inmates in these Homes, a showy funeral is of paramount importance. For those with benevolent funds, they willed that their fellow sisters from the 'kung sz uk' to claim their body and to perform what they consider 'proper' burial. In the Silver Jubilee Home and the Penang Home about 60 percent of the amahs have sisters or close friends to claim their body once they passed away.

Moreover, 'tsz mooi uk' also provide a body of mourners who worship ancestral tablets and care for the ritual needs of deceased members because they recognise the obligation to do so as members of a 'family'.

Voluntary associations as alleged by Wirth and Little are adaptive mechanism to urban conditions by labour migrants from rural tribal areas. Eventhough it can be agreed that 'public houses' especially 'tsz mooi uk' (sisters' house) are to an extent, resemble an adaptive mechanism to urban conditions in that it facilitates minor adjustments to the more cosmopolitan ethos of the city by substituting for the extended family, a grouping based upon the members' common needs. It also provide members with mutual aids, including financial support when out of work, sympathy and financial assistance in the cases of illness, the responsibility for the funeral, act

as an employment agency and provided a cheap accommodation. However, it is more an institution to serve some specific needs of the unattached amahs. The ranking system in the 'tsz mooi uk' offers opportunities for prestige and avenues for initiative when similar opportunities in outside society (in traditional Chinese society) are extremely limited for women particularly the unattached women. A woman can become a head or a founder of a "family" (sisterhood) on almost equal terms with a man, and can exercise authority over a number of other women. As an ancestor, her soul-tablet will have a central position in the "family" altar or shrine, and special ceremonies and dinners will be held to commemorate her death anniversary. On the contrary, in the outside society, an unmarried woman is usually not given a funeral. Even if she is, it would only be a small one. Her body would not be taken to the family's graveyard. Furthermore, there would not be a soul-tablet erected at death, for her worship.

Public houses do not need an urban environment for its existence. This is proven by its existence in rural districts in Kwangtung in the late nineteenth century as one of the many societies to protect the unattached Chinese women from any attempts to force them to break their anti-marriage vows. Thus, it is not an urban phenomena born out of what Wirth termed a situation of 'anomie', but a popular cultural practice in their home regions which at the time of immigration brought to Malaya by these unattached Cantonese immigrants.

When these 'public houses' were first set up in Penang remains an uncertainty. However the amahs had been in this country for more than three

generations is a certainty. An amah in her late 60s remembers, "There were already those in their 80s working here when I was fresh from China in my 20s. Moreover we were all staying in the 'public houses' that had existed tens of years back".

'Public houses' catering for the needs of women from one village alone or one small area of a province in China tend to grow old and die with their members rather than throw their membership open to a larger variety of women. The ban on the immigration of Chinese which has cut off their original supply of members will undoubtedly strengthen this tendency unless the scope of their operations and membership is enlarged. In each case the house is run on a village basis, the village being the one from which in the past large numbers of immigrants came to Malaya to work. The possibility of throwing open their membership is further hampered by the intentions of landlords claiming their houses. This is only for houses purchased under contract. The landlord's action make it impossible for the amahs to sell their share in the 'tsz mooi uk' to other sisters or persons outside the original sisterhood's group. These houses once claimed, can be put to more profitable purposes as they are usually situated in the heart of Chinatown - a busy commercial area. Moreover, these houses will someday soon have to give way to the rapid development in the city of Penang.

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that a demand for the facilities of such organizations or institutions will be maintained at the existing level by locally born female members of the Chinese community. There are increasing opportunities for women to earn a living, hence as one of the supplementers

to the family's incomes, parents will be less inclined to let their daughters leave home. Furthermore there are many opportunities available elsewhere for women to exercise their initiative and rights for example in the place of employment, there exist trade unions. Hence the most important factor for the continued existence of 'public houses' for the use of the elderly and unattached women will be the willingness of some younger people to run such institutions and care for the inmates.

The amahs interviewed is the remnants of a unique institution, soon to be buried in the memories of those of us who ever had an opportunity to get acquainted with them. Those who have not will never know an amah, for she will soon cease to exist.

NOTES

1. By buying a share in a 'tsz moo i uk' an amah qualify herself as a member of the sisterhood.

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APPENDIX